THE PROFESSOR & THE PARSON

A Story of Desire, Deceit and Defrocking

BY ADAM SISMAN

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 211 1
eISBN 978 1 78283 530 1

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Prologue

On 25 November 2005 a man died at Kettering General Hospital, Northamptonshire. The death certificate was registered four days later. The person registering the death was Ann Barbara Peters, widow of the deceased. The dead man's name was given as Robert Peters. He was described as a retired university lecturer. The certificate gave his date of birth as 11 August 1928, which made him seventy-seven at the time of his death.

None of these details was true.

Introduction

I happened upon the story of Robert Peters while writing a biography of the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper. Like most people, I had not heard of Peters before. I first noticed his name on the cover of a thick folder, inscribed by fountain pen in Trevor-Roper's lucid, distinctive hand. The folder was among the papers in his study at the Old Rectory, sometimes unkindly described as the only nice house in Didcot. After Trevor-Roper's death in 2003, the Old Rectory remained silent and uninhabited for several years, its contents largely undisturbed. In winter it was bitterly cold. I would go there occasionally to work on these papers, trying to keep warm in coat and gloves until the heating took the edge off the chill. On at least one occasion I slept in Trevor-Roper's bed; his clothes still hung in the wardrobe, and there were still books on the bedside table, including of course a volume of Horace. His was no ordinary archive; among the more conventional records of an academic historian was correspondence with some of the most senior officers in British intelligence, and other documents relating to Trevor-Roper's wartime service with MI6 – including an adjutant's ledger of Hitler's appointments, no doubt pocketed during Trevor-Roper's exploration of the ruined and partially flooded bunker in the autumn of 1945.

Eventually the contents of his study were removed to Christ Church. As the movers lifted one of the archive boxes into the waiting van, a Luger dropped out.

My biography of Trevor-Roper was published in 2010. As the book relates, Trevor-Roper met Peters in Oxford in the late 1950s. Trevor-Roper was then a professor, and Peters a student reading for a postgraduate degree. The professor agreed to see him, to hear Peters complain that he was being persecuted. Like so many others before and since, Trevor-Roper believed the elaborate tale that Peters told him, until it began to collapse under the weight of contrary evidence. Once he realised that Peters had been lying, Trevor-Roper was sufficiently intrigued to want to know more. He investigated further, and was startled by what he discovered. As a responsible academic, he was appalled by Peters's success in outwitting the authorities; but as an individual who delighted in the *comédie humaine*, he could not help being amused by it. He took a malicious glee in the discomfiture of those whom Peters had fooled. Peters's ploys exposed the innocence of some, and the pomposity of others.

Trevor-Roper began to keep a dossier on Peters, which he would maintain for the next quarter of a century. A network of informants, in different countries and in different spheres of life, kept the professor abreast of the latest antics of 'our old friend'. It was this bulky dossier that I found in Trevor-Roper's archive while conducting research into his life. In my biography I drew on the dossier to write a brief account of Trevor-Roper's initial brush with Peters. But this was only the beginning; most of what he learned about Peters remained untold. The professor was urged to write a book about the bogus parson, and was tempted to do so; but he hesitated, deterred by the threat of a defamation

suit while Peters yet lived. He continued to collect information about Peters, but for now he preferred to write about another extraordinary fraudster, this one safely dead: the eccentric Sinologist Sir Edmund Backhouse. Though their backgrounds were utterly different, Trevor-Roper recognised similarities between the characters of Peters and Backhouse. The deceitfulness of such men was matched by their gall.

In 2017, while I was revisiting Trevor-Roper's archive, now safely stowed in Oxford, it occurred to me to consider writing about Peters myself. Trevor-Roper's dossier was my starting point, but I soon found another substantial file on Peters, kept by successive Presidents of Magdalen, the Oxford college to which Peters had belonged at the time when he met Trevor-Roper; and then another bulky folder, in the Cambridge University Library, of material on Peters assembled by a former Regius Professor of Divinity. I contacted a retired clergyman, then in hospital in the last stages of his final illness, who ensured that I received his own dossier, which he jokingly referred to as 'The Life and Crimes of Robert Parkin Peters'. Other documents came my way through a variety of sources; one of those with whom I made contact had contemplated writing a book about Peters himself. I am sure that there is more material to be found: not least at Lambeth Palace, where there is said to be a filing cabinet stuffed with papers on Peters. My attempts to storm the palace have been repulsed. The official line is that 'clergy disciplinary files' cannot be made available to scholars until thirty years after the subject's death – in this case until 2035, and I cannot wait that long. My argument that Robert Peters had not been an Anglican clergyman since 1955 was met with a stony silence: the door has remained firmly shut. Of course I understand why

such files are sensitive; but if the story of Robert Peters shows anything, it is that swindlers benefit from the reluctance of individuals and institutions to reveal that they have been swindled. Secrecy benefits the criminal. In this instance, so far as I am aware, the Church of England has little, if anything, of which to be ashamed, though perhaps something of which to be embarrassed. Earlier custodians of Lambeth Palace had been keen to spread the word about Peters's misdemeanours, but the incumbents prefer to keep mum. It cannot possibly do any harm, and it might well do good, for Lambeth Palace to make an exception to its own arbitrary rule. But there is no reasoning with the bureaucratic mind.

Other avenues of enquiry also led nowhere. Perhaps understandably, some of the women who had been deceived by Peters were reluctant to talk to me; and I felt reluctant to press them. While aware that there must be more to be discovered about Peters, I felt that I had to stop somewhere, or I would never finish. As Trevor-Roper himself remarked, at a similar point in his study of a different subject, there is a law of diminishing returns; and 'if a problem will not yield to a direct assault, it may be wisdom to pass it by and tackle another, which may indirectly serve our purpose, rather than lay a long and futile siege to an impregnable fortress.'

It was clear to me from the start that a conventional biography was not the best form for such a subject. For one thing, Peters was such an inveterate liar that it was impossible to believe a single word that he wrote or said: even the most mundane facts would need to be verified independently. Thus, for example, he consistently lied about the year of his birth, providing different dates at different times. Trevor-Roper compiled what he

called a 'curriculum vitae', a true chronology of Peters's life, in contrast to the many fallacious curricula vitae that Peters composed in the course of his career. (He would sometimes refer to this as the 'Revised Version', an allusion to the revised version of the King James Bible issued in the nineteenth century.) I have appended at the end of this book an updated chronology, as a guide to readers who may find Peters's often tortuous progression confusing.

Studying Peters is like tracking a particle in a cloud chamber: usually one cannot see the man himself, but only the path he left behind. I realised early on in the process that Peters could only be known from the outside: his inner thoughts and feelings were hidden, and would almost certainly remain so, however much I might discover about him otherwise. Indeed, it seemed to me likely that he barely knew himself, because had he done, he surely could not have acted as he did. His motives could only be deduced from his behaviour. Nevertheless I have attempted a brief character sketch as a form of conclusion.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part describes the initial encounter between the professor and the parson, and Trevor-Roper's dawning appreciation that Peters was not what he pretended to be. It is drawn largely from a document written by Trevor-Roper soon afterwards, while his memory was still fresh. The dossier itself is the basis of the second part, the core of the story, as Trevor-Roper pursued Peters over a twenty-five-year period. The third part of the book describes what happened to Peters after Trevor-Roper gave up the pursuit, and what I discovered when I took it up again, half a lifetime later. Like a detective re-examining an old case, I have been frustrated to find that parts of the story are now irretrievable. But to compensate

for that which has been lost, I have been able to discover much that is new.

Some readers, alarmed by Peters's success as a con man, may feel that this story is a cautionary tale. But my purpose has been to entertain, not to instruct. I hope that many readers will find the book as enjoyable to read as it has been to write.

PART I

1958–9

ONE

In which the professor meets the parson and hears his history

The letter itself has not survived in the file; nor has the envelope. All we can be sure of is that on a November day in 1958 a letter arrived, addressed to the Regius Professor of Modern History.

The Regius Professor was Hugh Trevor-Roper, who had been appointed to this post, the most senior within the faculty, the previous year. As such he was correctly addressed not as 'Professor', but as 'Regius'.

Still only forty-four years old, Trevor-Roper was then at the height of his powers. Though very short-sighted, with thick pebble spectacles, he was celebrated for his forensic powers of enquiry, which he had exhibited as an MI6 officer, in his official investigation into the fate of the Führer. He pursued evidence with the same avidity as he had pursued foxes – until he fell from a horse and broke his back. Witty, clever and confident, even arrogant, he was equally at ease in common rooms or drawing rooms: he mixed easily in high society, and in 1954 had married Lady Alexandra, eldest daughter of Field Marshal Earl Haig. In

'Wielding a cruel pen': Hugh Trevor-Roper in his Christ Church rooms in the 1950s.

1947 he had made his name with his bestselling book *The Last Days of Hitler*, which drew on his wartime intelligence work. From the proceeds he was able to buy a grey Bentley, which he parked ostentatiously in Christ Church's Tom Quad. Now he was writing a big book on the English Civil War, which, it was confidently predicted, would cement his reputation as one of the leading scholars of his generation. He was also enjoying a long-running feud with the most formidable of foes, Evelyn Waugh. 'There is nothing so exhilarating as a good battle, I find,' he wrote to his brother-in-law, after successfully defending himself against a prosecution for dangerous driving: 'especially if one wins it!' Wielding a cruel pen, he was a daunting opponent, feared for his merciless demolition of historians who failed to meet his scholarly standards. Unsurprisingly he made enemies,

within and without the university; his success bred jealousy and resentment. But such feelings were not uncommon in Oxford, where enforced proximity over long years could sharpen dislike into loathing.

The letter came from a Miss Gibson, who lived in North Oxford. As daughter of the late Nuffield Reader in Pathology, she was connected with the university, albeit indirectly, and therefore had some claim on the attention of its senior officers. She referred to her lodgers, a married couple. This pair, she said, were suffering, both in their health and in their studies, as a result of 'vindictive persecution from outside the university'; and she appealed to the Regius Professor, as one of the most senior members of the faculty in which both worked, to help them.

Trevor-Roper vaguely recalled the couple, a Mr and Mrs Peters, who had appeared at his seminar in early modern history back in the summer. Both were graduate students, working for B.Litt. degrees:* he on the archdeaconry of St Albans in the sixteenth century, she on the eighteenth-century press. Like all members of the university, each was attached to a college: he to Magdalen, she to Lady Margaret Hall. They had attended his seminar for a fortnight, and then appeared no more. There was nothing particularly mysterious in this absence; graduate students came and went, following their own interests and specialities wherever these led.

Trevor-Roper telephoned Miss Gibson and cautiously enquired whether her lodgers might not be suffering from a

* The B.Litt. (Bachelor of Letters) is a higher degree, no longer awarded at Oxford and most other universities.

persecution complex. She was adamant that they were not. In a voice trembling with emotion, she begged him to help 'these dear people'. Trevor-Roper agreed to see Peters at his office in the history faculty at noon the next day.

They met for an hour. Peters was a small, chubby-cheeked, bespectacled man with thinning hair and an earnest manner, who spoke with a slight lisp. He told Trevor-Roper that he was thirty-four, though he looked older. He had spent some years in America; and there, he said, had been ordained priest by Bishop Bayne of the diocese of Olympia, in Washington State. Throughout the interview he made a favourable impression, answering questions sensibly and readily providing details of names, places and approximate dates. Using a fountain pen, Trevor-Roper took notes on a sheet of lined foolscap. It did not occur to him to question his visitor's veracity.

When Peters told the professor that he was being persecuted 'in the most unaccountable manner' by the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Harry Carpenter, Trevor-Roper's interest was immediately awakened; here, perhaps, was an opportunity for him to make mischief. He relished sparring with authority, with the Church authorities perhaps most of all. In part this was personal, to do with his own violent reaction against religion as a young man. In part it was circumstantial, for he had been surrounded by clergymen for most of his Oxford career. Trevor-Roper had been an undergraduate and then a young don at Christ Church, which was (and remains) a unique combination of college and cathedral, known as 'the House' after its Latin name, *Aedes Christi*, the House of Christ. The head of the college is the Dean of the Cathedral, supported by six canon professors. As a result there has always been within Christ Church a tension

between the sacred and the secular. Trevor-Roper's relations with his clerical colleagues were generally cordial, but teasing: he took pleasure in anything that caused them discomfort, while they generally tolerated him with Christian forbearance. His first book, a biographical study of Archbishop Laud, had made him notorious for his anticlerical quips. 'Laud's clerical biographers,' he had written, 'since they approach him on their knees, are naturally unable to see very far.' He had mocked the established Church as 'an unmolested cipher, neither loved nor hated, and approached with the decent, if meaningless, reverence allowed to the dead'. But Trevor-Roper's jibes were not limited to Anglicans; he dealt it out to both High and Low, scoffing at Catholics as credulous fanatics and dissenters as joyless Puritans.

Peters explained that his friend the Reverend Leon Janes, vicar of St Barnabas (an imposing Italianate church in Jericho),* had invited him to officiate there, and that he had been eager to oblige; but being a punctilious person, he had thought that he should obtain permission from the Bishop of Oxford before doing so. Luckily he had happened to meet Bishop Carpenter over a college dinner one night at Keble,† had broached the subject then and had renewed his request by calling on him at home. The bishop had seemed willing to grant his wish, though he had alluded to certain differences of doctrine between the Church of England and the Episcopal Church in America,

* St Barnabas was founded in the nineteenth century by supporters of the Oxford Movement and has maintained the Anglo-Catholic traditions of its founders to this day.

† Carpenter was an honorary Fellow of Keble, having been Warden of the college before being made bishop; undergraduates there knew him as 'the Carp'.

which made it necessary for him to discuss the matter with the American bishop who had ordained Peters. Fortunately that very bishop, the Bishop of Olympia, would be in England imminently, to attend the Lambeth Conference.

At first, so Peters recounted, everything had gone swimmingly. Bishop Carpenter had gone up to London during the Lambeth Conference, had discussed the matter with his Episcopalian brother, Bishop Bayne, and all was now settled. Shortly after his return to Oxford, in a chance meeting in the street, he had spoken to Peters and had confirmed that he was now free to officiate within the diocese. And so the hitherto hesitant Peters had mounted the pulpit of St Barnabas and boldly preached the word of God to an attentive congregation. And then he had done so again, and again – until one Sunday evening, when, in an apparently inexplicable volte-face, the bishop had telephoned the Reverend Mr Janes and instructed him that on no account should Peters be allowed to officiate any longer at St Barnabas, or anywhere else in the diocese. The vicar had protested, but the bishop was firm. He denied ever having met Peters and disclaimed any knowledge of him.

Humiliated and insulted, Peters protested to Trevor-Roper that he had done everything he ought to have done in obtaining permission from the bishop before preaching, though he admitted that he had received nothing in writing to that effect. Now he feared that the bishop had some prejudice against him. Evidence had come his way of the arbitrary proceedings of Bishop Carpenter, of his instability of purpose and capricious memory, of his unjust practices, of his bias against virtuous parsons from America.

'What has all this to do with me?' asked Trevor-Roper. Peters replied that it had a bearing on his work for his B.Litt. degree. He had been labouring hard. His supervisor, Miss Kathleen

Major, a medieval historian who also happened to be Principal of St Hilda's College, was pleased with his progress. He planned soon to submit his dissertation to the faculty board. The B.Litt. was of great importance to him. And now, at the last moment, the shadow of the prelate had fallen between him and his objective. He feared that the bishop might intervene to prevent the board from granting him a degree.

Trevor-Roper sought to reassure him. The bishop had nothing to do with the board. The only way in which it could be persuaded not to admit him to a degree would be if his college, Magdalen, refused to sponsor his application. 'But that,' exclaimed Peters, 'is precisely what the bishop may now achieve!' There was evidence that the bishop had slandered him to the college authorities. The President of Magdalen* had sent for Peters, and had asked a series of disquieting questions. 'Do you think,' the President had asked at one point, 'that anyone has been impersonating you?' Peters had been unsettled by the interview, though no accusations had been laid against him. He asked himself what lay behind it. Why had the President, a busy man, busier still since the beginning of that academic year, when he had taken on the extra responsibilities of Vice-Chancellor, summoned him? Plainly he had been measuring up Peters against some information from outside. Where had this information come from? Once Peters asked himself this question, the unspoken purpose of the interview had become obvious: he had

* Heads of Oxford colleges are known by a variety of titles. The head of Magdalen is President; the head of St Hilda's is Principal; and the head of Christ Church is Dean. Other heads of college are known as Master, Rector, Warden and Provost.