

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Richard Davenport-Hines has produced a richly entertaining look at the political alumni of the Christ Church history course – a former nursery for British statesmen

History in the House

Some Remarkable Dons and The Teaching of Politics, Character and Statecraft

By **Richard Davenport-Hines**
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In these lax days even *The Times* has been known to refer to Christ Church “College”, Oxford. The error infuriates its members. Like Peterhouse in Cambridge (where I read history), Christ Church is unadorned by any addition. It is unique in being both a cathedral and a seat of secular learning. To its members it is known simply as the House.

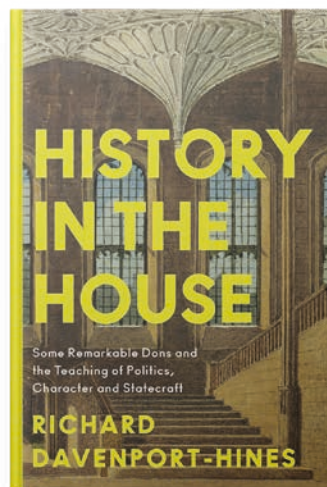
It is hard to tell how much damage this famous place has sustained as a result of the bitter row between its recent dean, Martyn Percy, and some of his colleagues, fought out at huge cost in the courts. This book looks back to a lost golden age when Christ Church was renowned as a nursery of statesmen. It has produced 13 prime ministers (of whom Alec Douglas-Home was the most recent), and innumerable lesser political mortals.

Writing with wit, zest and an impressive command of immense detail, Richard Davenport-Hines provides a richly entertaining account of how a succession of Christ Church historians from the late

19th century until the 1970s went to great lengths to nurture budding politicians.

The Conservative Party was the principal beneficiary. The college’s leading historian in the inter-war years, Sir Keith Feiling, could not do enough for it. He showed the extent of his ardour in his book on its early history, which asserted that it came into existence 40 years before the first Tories actually appeared in 1680.

Feiling did not escape personal sadness. His only son worked diligently as a civil servant “until he failed a security vetting during the Whitehall purge of male homosexuality in the 1950s”. Davenport-Hines delights in dropping such diverting details into his narrative.



The Tories did not have it all their own way. In the 1930s, Patrick Gordon Walker, later a Labour cabinet minister, startled his colleagues by writing books “for the workers”. They alone, he said, had “the ability to understand the history not only of the suppressed classes, but of the ruling classes”. This novel doctrine seems to have



The Dorchester, 1973 (L-r) Hugh Trevor-Roper with Ted Heath, Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson

brought him few readers. He is best remembered for losing elections in 1964-5, when opponents of immigration campaigned viciously against him, particularly in the infamous Smethwick contest.

Like many other politicians, Gordon Walker was given a peerage as a retirement present. Two other Christ Church historians, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Robert Blake, were elevated to the Lords in the 1970s because of their distinction within their profession.

Trevor-Roper, ennobled by Mrs Thatcher as Lord Dacre of Glanton, was in a class of

his own. His work ranged over the centuries, and over many countries and cultures. He brought much laughter to readers of *The Spectator* in the late 1960s, writing in 17th-century prose as Mercurius Oxoniensis to puncture the pretensions of student radicals. He thrived on controversy, which brought him many

enemies, whose dislike gave him much pleasure. Combat upheld his spirits. His avowed aim, and his

certain achievement, was to make history live.

Lord Blake was only a little less magnificent. His incisive work on the history of the Conservative Party since the 1830s is of enduring significance. His life of Benjamin Disraeli, published in 1966, is perhaps the greatest of all modern political biographies.

Davenport-Hines, himself a prolific historian, writes at length about Trevor-Roper and Blake with the affection and understanding they deserve in the last two chapters of this outstanding book. ■