Discussing Africa:

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. The copious and circumstantial accounts of Missionaries completely confirm this, and Mahommedanism appears to be the only thing which in any way brings the Negroes within the range of culture. (93)

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitionary phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History. (99)
Hugh Trevor-Roper, 1963

Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper, Baron Dacre of Glanton (15 January 1914 – 27 January 2003) was an English historian of early modern Britain and Nazi Germany.

Debates on African history

Another aspect of Trevor-Roper’s general outlook on history and on scholarly research that has inspired controversy is his viewpoint on historical experiences of pre-literate societies. Evoking Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Edward Gibbon, in 1963 he made the now-famous remark that sub-Saharan Africa had no history prior to European exploration and colonization, saying rather that “there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.” This comment, recapitulated in a later article which called Africa “unhistoric”, was criticized by Africanists in various fields of academia, spurring intense debate, up to today, between historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and those in the emerging fields of postcolonial and cultural studies on the definition of “history.” The conflict centers around what factors must be present in order for a society to qualify as having a “history,” which Trevor-Roper thought required documentable evidence of if and how a society’s “movement” toward change and development was accomplished. Many historians have agreed with this central claim but think historical evidence should also include oral traditions as well as an established system of written history, which had previously been the litmus test for a society having left "prehistory" behind. Other critics of Trevor-Roper’s claim have questioned the validity of systematic interpretations of the African past, whether by materialist, Annalist, or, like Trevor-Roper, conservative methods. Still others have gone as far as saying that all approaches which compare Africa with Europe or directly integrate it into European history are not sufficient for an accurate description of African societies and cultures. Nevertheless, although virtually all scholars now agree that Africa qualifies as having a “history," Trevor-Roper's statements played an indirect, but important role in the development of post-colonial African studies by motivating wide-ranging discussions about Africa’s role in the present and historical world.