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**FELIX GILBERT
AS SCHOLAR AND TEACHER**

*Edited by
Hartmut Lehmann*

*with contributions by
Mary Patterson McPherson
Barbara Miller Lane
Gordon A. Craig*

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**FELIX GILBERT
AS SCHOLAR AND TEACHER**

Felix Gilbert at Bryn Mawr College

Barbara Miller Lane

**Insight and Energy:
Reflections on the Work
of Felix Gilbert**

Gordon A. Craig

Preface

ON JUNE 4, 1992, Bryn Mawr College and the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., sponsored a lecture at Bryn Mawr by Gordon Craig to honor the memory of Felix Gilbert. As part of the occasion, Barbara Miller Lane spoke about Felix Gilbert's role as a teacher at Bryn Mawr, and I attempted to point out briefly his importance for German historians after 1945.

Felix Gilbert was very supportive of the activities of the German Historical Institute from the very beginning, and he spoke at two of our conferences. What he contributed to the field of history in Germany was, of course, much more, and this is especially true for his studies on German historiography.

Born in 1905, Felix Gilbert studied at the universities of Heidelberg, Munich, and Berlin in the 1920s. As a student of Friedrich Meinecke, Gilbert wrote his dissertation on *Johann Gustav Droysen und die Preussisch-Deutsche Frage* (Munich and Berlin, 1931) and edited Droysen's *Politische Schriften* (Munich and Berlin, 1933). Gilbert emigrated to the United States via England after *Machtergreifung*. In the 1930s and 1940s, he undertook extensive studies on principal thinkers of the Italian Renaissance and on European diplomacy of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, he returned to topics related to German historiography by analyzing and encouraging the translation into English the work of two of the most productive German historians he knew personally, Otto Hintze and Friedrich Meinecke. During those years, first while teaching history at Bryn Mawr College and then as a member of the School of Historical Studies of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, he published extensively on questions of historiography and the role of the historian.

Those of us who were *Assistenten* at the University of Cologne in the early 1960s first met Felix and Mary in 1960. From the beginning, Felix showed a keen interest in our work, our thoughts, and our lives. Over the years, Felix's interest in his young German colleagues never diminished. For many of us, he became an intellectual mentor, and for some of us, a friend who accompanied us for over thirty years of our lives.

Perhaps Felix did not know how important, how crucial, the first of these years were for many of us. To study history at German universities in the 1950s meant to work with some historians whose credibility as teachers had been tarnished. Among them were historians who had actively supported the Third Reich, and we were aware of that; others had done so passively, and we did not admire them for that. Some preferred to concentrate on topics other than the one that was foremost on our minds, namely the history of National Socialism; others chose to discuss problems of social history and structural history, as if deliberately to evade questions of moral responsibility and guilt.

In this situation, for some of my generation, those German historians who had been forced to emigrate and who spent the years of the Third Reich abroad had far more authority than many of those who stayed on in Germany. When I started to study history at Tübingen in 1955, I attended the courses offered by Hans Rothfels, just as others, at other universities, attended the courses of Dietrich Gerhard and Hans Rosenberg. What I became aware of only later was the fact that our mentors from abroad also taught us new insights and new methodologies, and that they guided us to the problems relevant in the international discussion in our field. Through this, they helped us reclaim the ground that had been abandoned by German historians since 1933.

To enhance our careers, Felix Gilbert made it possible that Wolfgang Mommsen, Thomas Nipperdey, myself, and some of our colleagues who were junior members of the German historical profession at the time were invited as visiting members to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. I dare not sum up what the year at Princeton meant for each of us. I had the good fortune to be there together with Jim Sheehan, whom Felix had also invited. Felix was pleased to observe that two people whom he had introduced started engaging in lively discussions. Jim and I became friends. (In 1988 he helped me organize the first of the conferences of the German Historical Institute on "German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933.") Years later, in his Princeton office, Felix introduced me to Jamie Melton. This was the beginning of an interchange that led to another of the institute's conferences, the one on "Paths of Continuity in Central European Historiography from the 1930s through the 1950s." That conference in Atlanta in March 1990 was one of the last occasions at which

Felix spoke publicly. Jamie Melton and I have decided to dedicate to Felix the upcoming volume that contains the papers of the Atlanta conference.

These are some of the instances that I can recall, but I know that I was witness to just a few of many such episodes. What Felix taught us by his example, more than anything else, was to strive for a certain attitude: to be inquisitive and to be fair; to be involved and to be thorough; to be specialized but not to get caught up in specialization; to combine interest in historiography with the unearthing of new source material; to talk with others about the problems of history and to do one's homework; to remain independent and to be committed to a historian's task—to hold what may be called the *Wächteramt*.

Some of those who have written about emigration history have argued that in the 1930s, America gained what Germany lost. In the case of Felix, for example, it might be said that Germany lost a Renaissance specialist, while America gained one. In my view, as I have attempted to explain, Felix's case was different. I do not want to question America's gain, but I want to stress Felix's continuing importance for German historians and for the field of history in Germany after 1945. It is a sign of our gratitude that the Academic Advisory Council of the German Historical Institute decided to name the reading room in the Institute's new building in honor of Felix.

We are thankful that we could be involved in the occasion at Bryn Mawr, and I am personally very pleased that I could express my deep-felt gratitude there, not only for myself but also for the institution that I represent. Let me again thank Bryn Mawr and Barbara Miller Lane for organizing this event, and let me also thank Gordon Craig for speaking to us and for giving due credit to Felix's outstanding achievements as a scholar.

Hartmut Lehmann
Washington, D.C.
September 1992

Greetings

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE WAS MOST PLEASED to be asked to join the German Historical Institute to remember Felix—indeed a rare and virtuous man, a splendid friend to persons and to institutions. I had the great pleasure of meeting and talking with Felix off and on this campus—sometimes at Princeton, sometimes here, and sometimes at the American Philosophical Society, and he always came up with topics of the greatest interest to talk about: the college, what was happening here and abroad, and his friends.

I enjoyed tremendously reading his memoir and also working with him as he prepared his essay for our centennial volume, which is a charming one, a delightful piece about an important part of Bryn Mawr's history in which Felix played a key role. He was a good friend to all of us, even to those of us who are not historians. He will be much missed here.

Mary Patterson McPherson
President, Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
June 1992

Felix Gilbert at Bryn Mawr College

Barbara Miller Lane

Felix Gilbert came to Bryn Mawr College in the fall of 1946. He developed almost immediately what I would describe as a love affair with Bryn Mawr and with teaching there. A few months after his arrival, his seniors waited upon Helen Manning "to express ... the opinion that Professor Gilbert was simply wonderful."¹ When, two years later, Felix received the first of his offers of a permanent membership at the Institute for Advanced Study, he wrote to J. Robert Oppenheimer that he was not yet ready to "place research over teaching," that teaching was still for him a "novel and inspiring experience," and that teaching at Bryn Mawr was too "important for the clarification of my ideas on history" for him to give it up.² In 1962, when the second offer of a permanent position at the institute came, I think Felix was ready to reverse the balance between research and teaching. But not before then.

Felix loved to teach at Bryn Mawr, and his students adored him from the outset. But there were also other factors that attracted him to Bryn Mawr College and that kept him there. Felix once wrote that Bryn Mawr offered him the opportunity "to work more quietly and steadily" than other settings would.³ On another occasion, he spoke of the "remarkable interest which the College takes in the personal well-being of members of the faculty," and that "Bryn Mawr ... is a unique place where it is good to live and to work."⁴

¹ Helen Taft Manning to Edward Meade Earle, Jan. 22, 1947, Felix Gilbert faculty file, pre-1962, Archives, Historical Studies-Social Science library, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J. Helen Taft Manning (1891–1987) was dean of the college from 1917–1919 and 1925–1941 and was chair of the Department of History from 1941–1955.

² Felix Gilbert to J. Robert Oppenheimer, March 6, 1949, and April 3, 1949, Felix Gilbert faculty file, pre-1962, Archives, Historical Studies-Social Science Library, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, N.J.

³ Felix Gilbert to Helen Taft Manning, May 25, 1946, Helen Taft Manning papers, Bryn Mawr College Archives.

⁴ Felix Gilbert to Katherine McBride, June 1, 1962, Felix Gilbert faculty file, Katherine McBride papers, Bryn Mawr College Archives.

There was a care for the individual there, and a measure of personal autonomy, that he greatly valued.

Felix also wrote of the importance to him and to other emigré scholars of Bryn Mawr's distinguished graduate school, "established after European, notably German, models, [which] was inclined to regard scholarship as a common enterprise of all nations."⁵ And often he spoke of the political stance of the college. This requires some explanation. Under the leadership of President Marion Park and Dean Manning (before Felix arrived), the college had taken a strongly anti-fascist position. It had been one of the earliest and most active of American colleges and universities in offering faculty positions to emigré scholars. (Among the emigré scholars whom Felix found there when he arrived, possibly the most important to him were Erich Frank, visiting professor of philosophy, and Richard Bernheimer, professor of the history of art.) According to Felix's own research, Bryn Mawr had also been the first American institution to establish undergraduate scholarships for refugees from Nazi persecution. (Felix wrote about this during the college's centennial in 1987.)⁶ This movement was initiated by the students themselves, and began in November of 1938, just after *Kristallnacht*. (The first recipient of one of these scholarships was Toni Gould.) Bryn Mawr continued to lead this scholarship drive in the United States in partnership with much larger institutions, such as Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley, and Chicago. For Felix and other scholars at Bryn Mawr in the forties and fifties, these commitments—to Europe, to graduate study on the European model, to internationalism, to the nurturing of refugees from fascism, and to anti-fascism itself—provided an immensely desirable context, perhaps one could even say a necessary context, in which to live and work.

In spite of his praise of Bryn Mawr as a place to work "quietly and steadily," Felix also believed that it was a great advantage to be "immediately involved in all aspects of college life: departmental meetings, committees, faculty meetings. A faculty member takes part in decisions on all levels; opinions are asked and can be expressed.

⁵ Felix Gilbert, "Refugee Professors at Bryn Mawr in the Thirties and Forties," in *A Century Recalled: Essays in Honor of Bryn Mawr College*, ed. Patricia Hochschild Labalme (Bryn Mawr, PA. 1987), 73–86, here 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Every newcomer immediately becomes part of the college in the full sense of the word."⁷ From the moment of his arrival, Felix joined in the governance of the college with gusto. At first he served on the Admissions, Nominations, Curriculum, and Graduate Committees, and set the language examinations in Greek, Russian, and Italian. During his last ten years at Bryn Mawr, Felix served almost continuously on the Appointments Committee, the college's most powerful committee and the one with the most influence on President Katherine McBride. In this role, as well as more informally, Felix helped to shape the character of the faculty, and of the institution itself, for years to come. Even now, thirty years later, a number of departments still bear the stamp of personalities whose appointments he supported and fostered.

Despite his time-consuming activities at Bryn Mawr, and despite a heavy teaching load, Felix was also committed to carrying on, during the Cold War, the political awareness that had earlier been woven into the life of the college by President Park. Together with Caroline Robbins, Helen Manning, Roger Wells, Peter Bachrach, Hertha Kraus, and Mildred Northrop, Felix organized frequent colloquia on current political issues: twice monthly normally, but sometimes weekly. His own contributions to these meetings ranged from Italian to Belgian to German to Czech politics, but included commentary on American politics and foreign policy as well. His emphasis was European and historical, but European history was seen as related to American current affairs.⁸

Bryn Mawr College in those days was extremely small: in 1946 Bryn Mawr had only sixty-two "ranked" faculty members, 576 undergraduates, and 122 graduate students. (Today it is about twice that size.) Many people might have found the college's smallness confining. But I do not think that Felix felt confined there. He was always a citizen of a wider world and often brought that wider world to Bryn Mawr. He helped to engage as speakers Arnold Toynbee, Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, Garrett Mattingly, Gordon Craig,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

⁸ See, for example, the *College News*, Feb. 26, 1947; Mar. 19, 1947; May 7, 1947; Oct. 15, 1947; Mar. 3, 1948; Nov. 3, 1948; Mar. 22, 1950; Oct. 18, 1950; Oct. 17, 1951; Nov. 18, 1953; Dec. 5, 1956, Bryn Mawr College Archives.

Leonard Krieger, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Paul Tillich, among others.⁹ Within the history department, he invited as visiting professors at various times Hanna Holborn, Theodor E. Mommsen, Theodor von Laue, Raymond Betts, Norman Rich, and Henry Winkler. Nor did Felix feel himself to be limited by departmental interests: he found many of his closest friends outside the history department—in such departments as Latin, Greek, history of art, political science, philosophy, English, biology, and chemistry.

Within the history department itself, Felix slowly reshaped the emphasis of instruction. (Caroline Robbins, chair from 1955–1968, was a kindred spirit in this.) Undergraduate teaching during his time there tended more and more to emphasize intellectual history and especially the history of political thought. In addition to his undergraduate modern European course, "Europe since 1890," Felix introduced Russian history, which he taught for many years. (He also worked to develop an interdisciplinary Russian studies program, which has only come to fruition in recent years.) And he introduced a full-year course in Renaissance and Reformation history. At the graduate level, Felix taught a seminar on Machiavelli and a seminar on modern Europe. His influence on his students was very great. Perhaps two dozen of the most distinguished women historians of my generation were inspired by his ideas and approaches, as were a great number of notable women scholars in other fields who took his courses as undergraduates.

As a teacher, Felix was kindly but immensely demanding. His doctoral students tell many affectionate stories of him, of which I will mention only one. It was normal that three weeks or so before her oral examinations, a graduate student would come to Felix for some last advice. He would offer to rehearse with her a typical exam. If the student agreed, they would talk for half an hour, and then he would say, "Congratulations, you have just passed your oral examination in my field." If she demurred, he would sigh, "Ah, Miss so-and-so, how do you suppose you are going to learn modern European history in just three weeks?" According to Felix, Friedrich Meinecke had given him his orals in just this way.

⁹ Toynbee and Berlin were Flexner lecturers, which meant that they stayed on campus for half a semester and gave seminars as well as lectures.

Felix taught almost exclusively from original texts. When I came to Bryn Mawr to take over Felix's courses, he lent me his undergraduate reading lists. I liked them very much, so I continued to work with them for a long time; that is, until I began myself to specialize differently. It seemed right and normal to me to teach the Renaissance by means of Petrarch, *Salutati*, and Guiccardini, for example, or modern Europe on the basis of Beatrice Webb, Harold Nicolson, the Nuremberg Trials, and the *Ciano Diaries*. I assumed that most historians taught in this way. It was a very long time before I realized how much these methods were Felix's own, before I understood that many historians teach history out of textbooks.

I would like to end on another personal note. I was not Felix's student for long, alas; just for the second semester of 1956/57, when he taught the Italian Renaissance at Harvard University. But that was long enough to think of myself as his student, as well as his friend, for the rest of my life. Before Felix came to Harvard, those of us working in both Renaissance and modern fields had eagerly devoured his Machiavelli articles. His emphasis on the relation of culture and politics, his analysis of Machiavelli's perceptions of the role of personal force in shaping events during times of chaos and upheaval, his discussions of Machiavelli's idea that reason and law can grow out of disorder through the struggles of talented individuals: these were deeply personal insights on Felix's part. They touched us, his students, deeply, too. They seemed to us at that time to offer a new blueprint for Renaissance studies, and they shed light for us on our recent experiences of war and dictatorship as well. When he came to the university and elaborated on these ideas, many of us decided that we wanted him to supervise our dissertations. But of course he was not at Harvard long enough. In my own case, Felix steered me away from the idea of pursuing a Ph.D. in Renaissance history and instead encouraged me to work on the relationship between art and politics in twentieth-century Germany. In the last stages of my dissertation, I saw him very often, since I was living in the Philadelphia area then. My scholarship, like my teaching, therefore owes a great deal to him. I am grateful to have this opportunity to acknowledge that debt.

At that time, I also got to know Felix's Bryn Mawr College and how he felt about it, so that, when I was offered a job there, I was completely delighted. But there was a problem. It was Felix's Bryn Mawr that I wanted to come to, and, although much of that has

persisted, much was lost when he left. Above all, *he* was no longer there. So, for me, there was always an undercurrent of sadness about being at Felix's Bryn Mawr without Felix.

**Insight and Energy:
Reflections on the Work of Felix Gilbert**

Gordon A. Craig

It is a great pleasure and privilege to have been asked to come here today and to talk about Felix Gilbert and his work. I am not sure that I am the person best qualified to do this; there are others who knew him more intimately and saw parts of his life that were hidden to me. Even in terms of time, there are several people here today who knew Felix longer than I did. The day before yesterday, in Berlin, Theodor Eschenburg told me that he held the prize in this respect, for he had gone to school there with Felix in 1910. Even so, I knew him a long season. I met Felix for the first time in 1939, when he came to New Haven to visit Theodor Ernst Mommsen, who, like me, was then a junior member of the Yale history department. We remained friends until his death. During those fifty-two years, we lived for the most part in different places, but we saw each other frequently, and we had many pleasant collaborations. These included not only books on which we worked together, but projects of one kind or another in the American Historical Association, particularly in that organization's Modern European Section, and in the American Philosophical Society. And at one time, as I was reminded when I went through my diary a few weeks ago, we were on a committee with Bob Cross of Swarthmore and Vann Woodward of Yale that went to the University of Rochester at the request of its president to try to straighten out the problems of its history department, which turned out to be very much like the problems of other history departments.

My diary also reminded me, although I hardly needed to have this recalled to me, of how heavy a debt I owed in my own work to Felix's provocations and his endless encouragement. He was always a bit shy about making suggestions to others, as if he feared that it might be considered presumptuous, and he preferred the oblique or indirect approach. He would say, "You know, someone really should do something with (such and such a subject)," and he would then talk about it in a way that excited you and persuaded you that this was the very subject you had been in search of for years, and that you must get down to it immediately. It is to this kind of Machia-

vellian insinuation that I owe my talk on "Johannes von Müller: The Historian in Search of a Hero" to the Modern European Section of the AHA, my coupling of Bettina von Arnim with Bismarck in *The End of Prussia*, and my decision to write a book on Zürich, which was the product of a lunch with Felix at the Faculty Club in Stanford. Somehow or another, whenever he made a suggestion of this kind, I felt a sense of obligation to do something about it. There is an entry in my diary dated April 21, 1983, written during the spring meeting of the American Philosophical Society, that reads:

So to Philosophical Hall to pull Felix out of a paper on nitrogen metabolism and to go and sit on a bench behind Independence Hall. We talked about *Makers of Modern Straugy* [we were working with Peter Paret on the new version of that book] and agreed that we must have a chapter on the Soviet Union even if we couldn't find an absolutely first-class person.... We talked about ongoing work, and Felix told me that he is going to the June conference in Berlin (but not to mine in Berlin in December). If I have to give a speech in Berlin and decide to focus on three Berlin worthies [a theme we had discussed earlier], Felix suggests Wilhelm von Humboldt, Rudolf Haym, and Ernst Troeltsch. As for my revision of the London piece, he will send me something by Kocka on the *Sonderweg* debate and his own piece on Droysen.

I never did write anything about Humboldt, Haym, and Troeltsch, a fact that has left me with an intermittent sense of unease, of work unfinished, of a debt unpaid. I guess I'm going to have to do something about it.

But it is not my purpose to talk about Felix's contributions to the work of other people (which would in any case take too long, since all of Felix's friends, and many other people as well, profited as I did from his advice and encouragement) but about his own work. And I have elected to do so from the standpoint of what seem to me to be two of its principal characteristics: its energy and its insight.

Compared with the average academic historian of our time, Felix Gilbert was, with respect to energy, a throwback to an age when historians were daunted neither by the scope nor the diversity of history but sought to embrace it all, lecturing and writing large books in many fields, and like as not ending their life's labors with an attempt at a *Universalgeschichte*, a history of everything. *Nous autres*, with our more rigorous standards of evidence and the benefit of accumulated knowledge, have concluded that much of the work

of that earlier time was amateurish and that the *Universalgeschichten* were not unusually filled with insupportable generalizations and profound silences about aspects of history that we now regard as important. And we have convinced ourselves that it is better not to try to know everything—and that it is sounder, and certainly safer, to be specialists on single periods or subjects and not to stray beyond their borders.

On the balance, we may have profited from these cautionary conclusions—I am not entirely certain of that—but we have also paid for them, for we have lost something of the confidence and the gusto of that heroic age, and also something of its irrepressible curiosity and its limitless energy. And this is reflected, and has been reflected for a long time, in the state of the historical profession in general. Not to put too fine a point on it, all too many of its members do not work hard enough, avoid subjects of scope and complexity, and, since lack of energy on the part of a writer reveals itself in his or her prose, write badly. The fact that, as an editor of the Princeton University Press told me not so long ago, the average work of history published by an academic press sells less than 500 copies is a distressing comment on the state of our discipline and its influence on the wider public—and so are the career profiles of many of our colleagues. Professor Hans Rosenberg, that remarkable teacher and scholar at Berkeley, who died not so long ago in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, was a notable cynic about the lack of energy among his fellow historians. He used to talk about what he called "the dissertation professor," who wrote his dissertation and then spent ten years getting it published. After that, he waited another ten years and wrote an article entitled "New Research in the Field of My Dissertation," and he then relapsed into inactivity until shortly before retirement, when he wrote his substitute for a *Universalgeschichte*, an article entitled "The Field of My Dissertation: Reflections and Reconsiderations." We all know such scholars.

Since Felix Gilbert began his work in 1931 with a dissertation on Johann Gustav Droysen and, fifty-two years later at the American Philosophical Society, promised to send me his latest article on that historian, a person who knew no more of his work might conclude that Felix, too, was a "dissertation professor." And yet how many different fields of history he mastered in the intervening years and with what profit to his fellow historians! The dissertation on Droysen and the edition of Droysen's political writings that followed

in 1933 gave Gilbert a fascination with the problems of German historiography that lasted until the end of his life and to which he returned periodically, as in his edition of the essays of Otto Hintze in 1975 and the penetrating analytical essay that accompanied it, and in the work about which I shall have more to say later, his *Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* in 1990. But even before the second work on Droysen was in print, Gilbert was in Florence, beginning the research on the Italian Renaissance that was to be the main focus of his scholarship in the years of his maturity. The coming of National Socialism, his emigration to England and later, in 1936, to the United States, and the coming of the war made any orderly pursuit of this work impossible, but at the same time it awakened new interests and opened up new areas of history to investigate. Thus, in the years at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, where he served as assistant to Edward Mead Earle from 1937 to 1943, he helped to plan and administer Earle's colloquia on foreign policy and national security. And, having become interested in the history of military strategy, Gilbert played a major role in the organization and composition of the symposium that led to the volume *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, which appeared in 1943 and included a treatment of the military thinking of Machiavelli from his hand that has never been surpassed. Similarly, his service with the Central European Section of the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services from 1943 to 1945, which took him to Washington, London, and Wiesbaden, was by no means a lacuna in his scholarly development, for it reinforced his interest in contemporary military and international history. This led, in the years after the war, to his publication of *Hitler Directs his War* (1951), which was based on the papers of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* and provided what was perhaps the first circumstantial description of the growing incoherence and irrationalism that had characterized Adolf Hitler's discussions with his military staff. This was followed two years later by *The Diplomats, 1919–1939*, a symposium volume on pre-war diplomacy.

The Bryn Mawr years were no less productive. They allowed him at long last to turn back to his Italian studies, and it was in this college that he completed the essays on Machiavelli's *Il Principe* and *Discorsi*, on Bernardo Rucellai, and on political ideas in Florence in

the age of Savonarola that were later, in 1964, collected under the title *Niccolo Machiavelli e il suo tempo*. All of this, one might have thought, would have exhausted the energies of a man who was also preoccupied with his teaching duties and with the joys of marriage, for it was at Bryn Mawr in 1956 that Felix married Mary Raymond. But there was more. It was the Bryn Mawr years that saw the ripening and conclusion of a book that had its origins in his work at the Institute, his study of the origins of American foreign policy, first adumbrated in his influential article "The `New Diplomacy of the Eighteenth Century," published in 1951, and then completed in his book *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of American Foreign Policy*, which won the Bancroft Prize in 1962.

In 1962, Gilbert was appointed Professor in the School of Historical Studies in the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton and remained there for the rest of his life. As he grew older, his scholarship never flagged, and no year passed without his having written several articles and reviews (sixty between 1962 and 1979 alone). Many of them were major works of scholarship, like his essay on Meinecke's *Drei Generationen deutscher Gelehrtenpolitik* in Fritz Stern and Leonard Krieger's *Festschrift* for Hajo Holborn, for example, and "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought" in Nicolai Rubinstein's *Florentine Studies*. In addition, he edited two collections of essays on history, one in collaboration with John Higham and Leonard Krieger in 1965 and the other with Stephen A. Graubard in 1972, as well as a collection of the historical essays of Otto Hintze, and wrote a textbook in the W. W. Norton series called *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present* (1970). In these years, Gilbert also completed two works that crowned his lengthy researches in the history of the Italian Renaissance, *Machiavelli and Guiccardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (1965) and *The Pope, His Banker and Venice* (1980), before returning to his starting point and writing the masterful *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt*, published a scant year before his death.

In this impressive corpus of work—work that will last as long as there are libraries and will be available throughout that time to scholars, students, and the general public—we can see what Samuel Taylor Coleridge, with a felicitous phrase, once called "the general and lasting consequences of rare and virtuous energy." It was an

energy driven by curiosity, by love (this is certainly true of the Italian studies), by Felix's interest in the role of ideas in history and of the relationship between structures and personality, and not least of all by his sense of the relevance of history to the present and to our contemporary concerns. He expressed this last conviction in a paper that he read at Rice University in Houston in 1962 in a series on "The American Political Tradition: Theory and Practice." I quote it here because it seems to me to be as relevant—perhaps more relevant—to our perplexities today as it was when Felix read it thirty years ago. He said:

Every discussion of American political theory and practice has to start from the fact that in the twentieth century the United States plays a crucial role in world politics and that everything that happens in the globe touches our interests.... Undeniably the maintenance of our position depends upon the power that we possess. But the success of our leadership depends also upon the impression which our social and political institutions make on other nations. The feeling of pride with which we look back on our history is now necessarily mixed with doubts about whether our political concepts and institutions as they have developed in the past are adequate to the new role which we have assumed or which has been thrown upon us.

Thus our interest in the historical background from which the forms of our political life have sprung has a twofold aspect: awareness of the manner in which our political thinking and our political institutions have developed helps us understand our way of conducting our affairs; history explains how politics functions. But in our present situation the realization of our connection with the past involves, also, the question whether the legacy of the past is a help or a hindrance in the tasks which the United States as world power has to fulfil.

Part of Felix's superabundant energy was always devoted to thinking about that question and related ones.

In 1985, when the American Historical Association presented its first Award for Scholarly Distinction to Felix Gilbert, the citation referred to him as the "master of a variety of fields" and added that in each of these he had "contributed works that stand as models of historical scholarship, rich in empirical specificity, yet resonant with a wider significance for understanding history as a whole." Those persons who had known Felix well or who had occasion to work with him would have agreed with this accolade while perhaps stating it somewhat differently. They were, of course, impressed by the variety of his mind and his interests, which was not usual among

academic historians in his adopted country. They came to take for granted the "finished" quality of his scholarly works, the sense of richness and completeness that characterized them. But, in addition, what never failed to impress, and even astonish, them was how often in casual conversation with friends about history he seemed to be able to illuminate a subject that was under discussion by showing it in an unusual light, by raising a question that had seemed so obvious that no one had ever thought to examine it, by suggesting the dimension that had been left out of account. All of his friends learned from exposure to his characteristic way of teasing old questions into original shapes. His readers experienced this, too, when the argument on the printed page led them in directions they had not expected to travel and to conclusions that surprised and charmed them. Somewhere in that wonderful book *Machiavelli and Guiccardini*, Gilbert says of Machiavelli's writings that there are "passages which touch us like an electric shock." But this is often the effect of Gilbert's writing, too, as can be attested by any reader of that passage in *Machiavelli and Guiccardini* in which he explains what Machiavelli meant by saying that "the purpose of politics [is] to keep society alive in the ever-moving stream of history."

This insistence upon looking beneath the surface of events and beyond the received opinion, upon considering whether what has been taken for granted is not both crucial and problematical and whether the obvious is not really the surprising, is what I would call insight or creative imagination, and it was a pervasive characteristic of Felix Gilbert's work.

Let me give you an example of this. In 1952, Felix and I thought it might be a good idea to put together a history of interwar diplomacy that would throw some light on the collapse of the international system in the 1920s, the failure to check totalitarianism in the 1930s, and the coming of the war. As far as we could see, although the war had been over for seven years, no one was planning such a volume, and so we decided to bring together twenty essays by young historians interested in diplomatic history, many of them our friends. As we planned the volume, Felix decided that we should break with the usual forms of diplomatic history, which never strayed from the level of ministers and heads of state (e.g. Palmerston's duel with Metternich during the Second Egyptian Crisis, or Bismarck and the question of Schleswig-Holstein) and always gave the impression that foreign policy was monolithic and that diploma-

cy was conducted by collective beings: "England then responded to France in the following terms," or. "After this *démarche*, Spain recoiled sharply"—that sort of thing. Felix argued that we should all, in our essays, pay more attention to how foreign policy actually worked, to the bureaucratic agencies and modalities that gave it precise formulation, and to the people below the ministerial level charged with executing it. We should ask ourselves, as far as it was appropriate to our specific assignments in the book, what the role of the foreign office was, how its particular traditions affected the formulation and execution of policy, and to what extent its weight in the decision-making process was affected by politics, particularly in totalitarian states. We should consider how the role of the ambassador changed in these years and what special problems were caused by the relationship between the home establishment and the agents in the field. A focus upon such problems would, he argued, give our volume a unity that most symposium volumes lacked, while emphasizing in a dramatic way the importance of aspects of the diplomatic process that had been all but ignored by the older historians.

This is the way we composed *The Diplomats, 1919–1939*, which appeared in 1953. Felix himself contributed two chapters, the first on two British ambassadors at the courts of dictators, Sir Nevile Henderson in Berlin and Lord Perth in Rome, an essay that documented how the nature of diplomatic reporting, particularly from Berlin, helped to confirm the government of Neville Chamberlain in its appeasement policy. The second chapter, on Galeazzo Ciano and his ambassadors, was a fascinating study of the way in which the Italian Foreign Office, an organization with a strong conservative tradition of support of the European balance of power, was conquered and debauched by the Fascist leadership and the contribution that this made to the coming of war in 1939. Both essays represented a new kind of diplomatic history, and this was true of the volume as a whole. Established diplomatic historians received the book with irritation or incomprehension, their reviews showing that most of the new insights were lost on them. Even so, the advantages that the new approach provided for the illumination of the foreign policy process were so palpable that they could not be ignored, and the book was widely influential in reshaping diplomatic studies.

It was the same kind of insight that helped to bring a new emphasis upon ideas to the study of American diplomatic history, which had generally, before Gilbert's time, been taught and written about as if it had no connection with the history of European foreign policy. When Gilbert, as a recent emigrant from Germany, became an assistant to Edward Mead Earle at the Institute of Advanced Study in 1937, he was fascinated by the debate between isolationists and interventionists that grew in intensity in the years between the outbreak of war in Europe and the involvement of the United States. He was impressed by the passions engendered by this prolonged controversy and by the fact that both sides appealed to history and cited the founding fathers in support of their cases. It occurred to him that the opposing views reflected, often in distorted forms, attitudes that had been held by the first settlers in America, but that these in turn had developed in Europe before the new world was settled. He decided then to attempt a kind of intellectual history of the origins of American foreign policy, a study in the transit of ideas from Europe to America and what happened to them in the process. Before he had finished—and his work was not complete until the publication of *To the Farewell Address*—he had made a thorough investigation of the effect of the Enlightenment upon the thinking of the Founding Fathers and, in particular, their avid interest in the history of foreign affairs, ancient and modern, and in the history of what they called "the old diplomacy." He demonstrated that it was not out of an innocent idealism or millenarianism that they called for a new kind of diplomacy but out of reasoned calculation. They believed that the United States had the favorable geographical position and in time would have the economic and physical power to adopt and carry out a new and more civilized foreign policy.

Felix Gilbert was the first historian to demonstrate this, but he was also the first with the insight to note the contradictions inherent in this view, contradictions that George Washington in his great political testament was unable to resolve, so that the resultant tension between realism and idealism has been a recurring problem in American foreign policy. Following Gilbert's lead, other historians have shown that, as early as the time of the Napoleonic wars, Americans were forced to temper their initial insistence upon the newness of their diplomacy by accommodating themselves to the

exigencies of international politics and of learning how the old diplomatic game was played.

Gilbert's insight, like that of any good historian, was reinforced by practical experience. Thus, his early interest in diplomacy and the confidence with which he dealt with its bureaucratic and technical aspects owed a good deal to the fact that in 1924, to help alleviate family financial distress caused by the inflation, he had interrupted his university studies in order to take a job in the German Foreign Office's historical section. There he learned a great deal about the actual and the pre-war method of doing diplomatic business and, at the same time, edited the volume in the series *Die Grosse Politik der europäischen Mächte* that dealt with the Baghdad Railway. (This probably helped him later to get his job at the Institute of Advanced Study, since Edward Mead Earle had written a book on that subject.)

In the same way, one of Gilbert's most engrossing works, his book called *The Pope, His Banker and Venice*, profited from the fact that he had, since his youth, been interested in banking and the activities of the great private bankers in history, for his mother was not only descended from the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, but was also connected with the Oppenheim banking family. This knowingness about money and those who handled it, combined with his deep understanding of Italian diplomacy and institutions, made *The Pope, His Banker and Venice* a study of economic diplomacy that had an almost contemporary relevance. The protagonists were the sixteenth-century pope, Julius II, his banker Agostino Chigi, and the Republic of Venice, which was in desperate straits because the power of the League of Cambrai, which included the Papacy, the Kingdom of France, and the German Empire, was arrayed against it. Venice's fate depended upon whether it could win the support of Julius II, and this in turn depended in large part upon whether an agreement could be made with Chigi about the importation of alum, whose closest source of supply was a papal monopoly. Gilbert's account of how this issue was resolved is fascinating, and his portraits of the warrior pope and his wily banker are adroitly drawn and psychologically persuasive.

Perhaps the best example of what I have called Gilbert's characteristic way of teasing old questions into original shapes is his last book. In 1981, when he was a visiting professor at Stanford University and was offering a graduate seminar on nineteenth-

century historiography, he began to read the latest scholarship on Leopold von Ranke and Jakob Burckhardt and, as he did so, began to notice, as was his wont, lacunae in the treatment, questions that were not addressed, things taken for granted and unexplored. In particular, he felt that there were two questions that had never been investigated satisfactorily.

The one, [he wrote,] was the relationship of Ranke's view of historical scholarship to the notions on the aims and purposes of history that had been developed in the eighteenth century; to put it briefly, what was really new in Ranke? Concerning Burckhardt ... the problem that seems to have been slighted, or at least not to have been discussed appropriately, contains the question of the relation in which his idea of history stood to the political and scholarly trends of his time, and to what extent his concept of cultural history was formed in reaction to them.

Gilbert's book *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (1990) was the outgrowth of this *Fragestellung*. It reflects the context out of which it grew. Short in length, direct and consequent in style, friendly—almost confidential—in tone, it is the book of a great teacher posing questions for his students (What did Ranke mean by *eigentlich* in his famous definition of history's purpose: namely, to discover *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*? What was the unifying theme in Burckhardt's view of cultural history? What, despite their profound differences, did the two historians have in common?) and then leading them on, step by step, to possible answers. It is a work that brings to its reader both intellectual excitement and deep pleasure, and I can think of few books more likely to captivate the minds of students and persuade them that history is important and worth adopting as a career.

Why was it that Gilbert himself decided to become a historian? In the memoirs of his early life, *A European Past*, he has a chapter on that subject, but it is puzzling and inconclusive. He tells us that the first book he was able to read by himself was a collection of historical biographies called *Grubes Geschichtsbilder* and that, when he had finished it, he said to his mother, "I want to become a professor of history." Later, he writes that that was obviously not the reason for his choice of career, but he never gives us another, except to say that, when he went to Heidelberg in 1922, he made history his principal field of study because "the study of history seemed of overwhelming importance and irresistible attraction because of the

world in which I had grown up, a world of politics." He then veers off to talk about the nature of Weimar politics and how it left him with a permanent feeling of uncertainty about the world, a point he elaborates later in the memoirs by writing: "We had little belief in the duration of stability. The one certainty we had was that nothing was certain."

Exactly why Felix Gilbert became a historian he never makes any clearer than that. And yet perhaps that is enough. At a time when conditions in the Roman Empire were not dissimilar to those in the Germany of Felix Gilbert's young manhood, Livy wrote, "History is the best medicine for sick minds," going on to explain how learning about the causes of past calamity and, by comparison and analogy, about how it has often been mastered brings comfort and equanimity to the contemplative mind. I like to think that it was something of this feeling that made Felix a historian and sustained him in what was, after all, not an easy life. In the introduction to a collection of Felix's essays that Arno J. Mayer edited under the title *History: Choice and Commitment*, Franklin L. Ford wrote that, in addition to his other qualities, Felix possessed "a continuity of attitude, a realistic toughness about events and their interpretation combined with an unflagging interest in what does, or did, happen and why. Perhaps all the energy [in his work] could not have survived interludes of discouragement over man and his affairs without the constant stimulation of a creative curiosity." That, I think, is very true. Felix Gilbert was not easily daunted, and he had the great gift of transmitting to others some part of the unquenchable creative energy that sustained him.

Semantic Scholar profile for Felix Gilbert, with 2 highly influential citations and 8 scientific research papers. Ensure your research is discoverable on Semantic Scholar. Claiming your author page allows you to personalize the information displayed and manage publications (all current information on this profile has been aggregated automatically from publisher and metadata sources). The UK national study of magnetic resonance imaging as a method of screening for breast cancer (MARIBS).