



Lord Thomas of Swynnerton obituary

Leading British historian acclaimed for his books on the Spanish civil war and the empire of Charles V

Paul Preston

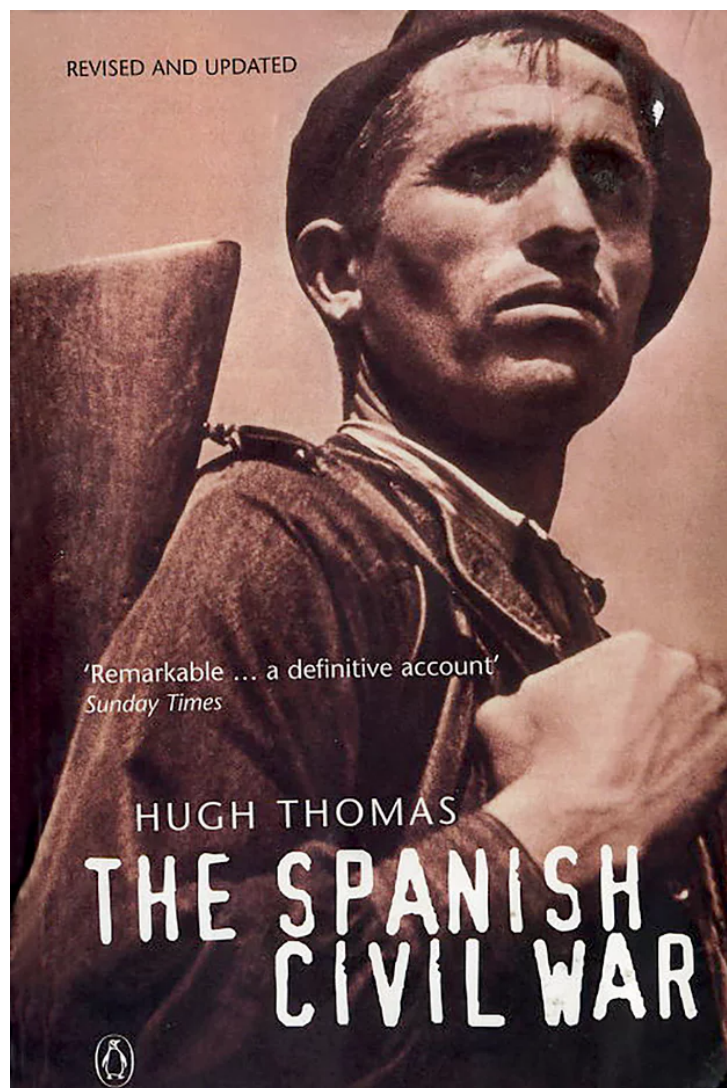
Tuesday 9 May 2017 18.19 BST

When *The Spanish Civil War* appeared in 1961, it quickly became established in the popular mind as *the* book on the conflict. Eulogistic reviews from liberal pundits such as Cyril Connolly and Michael Foot saw it widely accepted as a classic, and it went on to sell nearly a million copies throughout the world.

At the time he embarked on writing it, Hugh Thomas, who has died aged 85, did not know any Spanish. But he set about reading voraciously, and ruthlessly picking the brains of innumerable participants on both sides, as well as of the war correspondent Henry Buckley and the great expert on the subject, Herbert Southworth. Not only was the resulting work presented in a colourful and highly readable style, but it also marked the first attempt at an objective general view of a struggle that still excited the passions of right and left.

Although banned in General Francisco Franco's Spain, the translation by an exiled Spanish publishing house in Paris, Ruedo Ibérico, became a clandestine bestseller. The dictator's propagandists had never ceased proclaiming that the war had been a crusade against communist barbarism. However, the impact of foreign works by Thomas and Southworth, smuggled in despite the efforts of the frontier police, entirely discredited the standard regime line. An example of official efforts to stifle the impact of Hugh's book was the arrest of Octavio Jordá, a 31-year old working-class Valencian, at the French frontier with two suitcases packed

with copies of it. At his subsequent trial, Jordá was found guilty of “illegal propaganda” and “spreading communism”, and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment.



The Spanish Civil War by Hugh Thomas. Photograph: Penguin

In response to Thomas and Southworth, Franco’s then minister of information, Manuel Fraga, set up an official centre for civil war studies to streamline crusade historiography. It was too late. So successful was the book that even Franco himself was regularly asked to comment on statements in it. The Caudillo largely dismissed it all as lies, denying that civilians were killed when he bombed Barcelona or that there were mass executions. The book’s notoriety led to colossal sales after the dictator’s death in 1975. In frustration, the centre’s director, Ricardo de la Cierva, called it a “vade mecum for simpletons”.

The degree of financial security that followed from the book’s success enabled Hugh in 1962 to marry Vanessa Jebb, the daughter of the diplomat Sir Gladwyn Jebb, later Lord Gladwyn, for whom he had worked in the British embassy in Paris. She was at the centre of the social circle that met at their home in Ladbroke Grove, west London, and they had three children, Inigo, Isambard and Isabella.

In 1966 Hugh was made professor of history at the University of Reading. Although a thoroughly entertaining and popular teacher, he was never comfortable with the demands of academic life, and resigned in 1976. Whether in intellectual or social circles, he could be charming and generous, but he was quite thin-skinned.

Even before going to Reading, Hugh had begun research for his gigantic history *Cuba, Or the Pursuit of Freedom* (1971). At nearly 1,700 pages, it was not a success. Its long early survey of

the island's history, beginning with the British occupation of Havana, was found hard going by many readers.

Only when it reached Fidel Castro's revolution did it match the confident sweep of the Spanish book. After Cuba, he was commissioned to do a similar job on Venezuela, but never really got started. Moreover, he felt constrained after spending, as he put it, "seven years in the study of a short period in the history of a small society and it is, therefore, natural that I should wish to write on a more generous scale". The result was *An Unfinished History of the World* (1979).

At the behest of his friend Roy Jenkins, he had a second unsuccessful attempt to secure a Labour seat (he had been the prospective candidate for Ruislip and Northwood in 1957-58) but was thwarted by members of the Militant Tendency on the selection committee.

Thereafter, if not in consequence, he publicly declared his abandonment of the Labour party and his embrace of Thatcherite free-market economics. He became one of Margaret Thatcher's unofficial advisers and was made chairman of her thinktank, the Centre for Policy Studies, in succession to Keith Joseph. In line with his new political vocation, when *An Unfinished History of the World* was awarded a £7,500 Arts Council literary award in April 1980, he refused to take the cheque. Saying that his bank manager would be aghast, he made the gesture on the grounds that the final chapters of the book argued that "the intervention of the state [leads] to the decay of civilisation and the collapse of societies".

In *History, Capitalism and Freedom*, a pamphlet published in 1979 with a foreword by Thatcher, he argued that the decline of Britain was the consequence of the encroachment of the state.

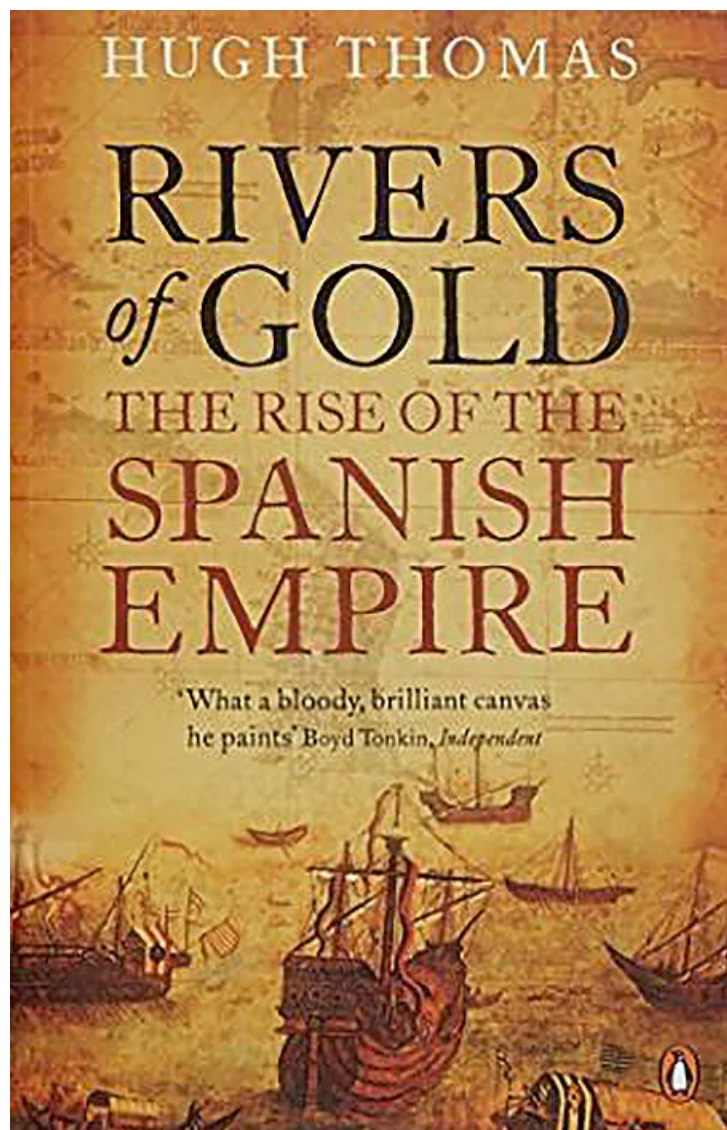
At the Centre for Policy Studies, he tried to help Joseph, now education secretary, to re-establish a sense of the glories of English history that they both believed had been obscured by the works of Eric Hobsbawm, EP Thompson and others. It was a project that belied his own works on Spain and Cuba and led to accusations that a first-class historian was trying to turn a subject on which he had never worked into "hollow, pseudo-patriotic indoctrination". In his pamphlet *Our Place in the World* (1983), he attributed the decline of Britain to the transformation of "the old England of individualism and laissez-faire into an England organised from above".

In 1981 he was made Lord Thomas of Swynnerton and there were rumours that he might be sent to Madrid as ambassador, although the deficiencies of his Spanish might have made it difficult.

Born in Windsor, Berkshire, Hugh was the only son of Hugh Thomas, a British colonial officer based in what was then the Gold Coast (now Ghana), and his wife Margery (nee Swynnerton), who worked in the Colonial Nursing Service. His uncle, Sir Shenton Thomas, was the governor of Singapore who surrendered to the Japanese in 1942.

From Sherborne school in Dorset, Hugh went to Queens' College, Cambridge, where he studied history, not very assiduously, but did attain prominence as a swashbuckling Tory president of the Union. After graduating, he led a champagne-fuelled life as a man-about-London. He was recruited for the Paris embassy thanks, it was said, to the influence of Harold Nicolson, a friend of Jebb's. He left in early 1957, claiming that he did so because of disgust with the British role in the Suez crisis. However, he may have jumped before he was pushed. Rumours swirled around about important documents inadvertently left on the Metro and/or an affair with the wife of a French minister. The publicity given to his clash with the Foreign Office made him an

attractive catch for the Labour party, and he edited *The Establishment* (1959), a collection of essays attacking the political elite.



Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire by Hugh Thomas.
Photograph: Penguin

However, he still needed an income. A brief stint as a lecturer at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst (1957) did not satisfy him. He tried his hand as a novelist, but *The Oxygen Age* (1958) did not sell. However, the previous year's equally unsuccessful novel, *The World's Game*, would change his life.

Dedicated to Jebb's friend Nancy Mitford, it cemented an already key connection. More importantly, it had been read by the gentleman publisher James MacGibbon, then a literary agent with Curtis Brown. MacGibbon invited him to lunch and told him that the scene in his novel where the hero went to fight in Israel had reminded him of volunteers in the Spanish civil war. Remarking that the time was ripe for a broad survey of the conflict, he urged Hugh to make a pitch. It was taken up by Eyre and Spottiswood.

After Thatcher's resignation in 1990, Hugh was increasingly disillusioned by what he saw as a festering Euroscepticism. Finally, in November 1997, he crossed the floor of the Lords to the Liberal Democrat benches. He announced: "I have resigned the Conservative whip in the House of Lords because since the election of May 1st last, its attitudes towards the European Union as it is presently constituted, and as it is likely to develop, have become ever more critical and sceptical." Once he was free of the politics that had never really fulfilled him, he returned to his real metier and produced a series of flamboyant works on imperial Spain.