

## *Felix Gilbert* 1905–1991

Felix Gilbert, Professor Emeritus in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, former President and long-time member of the Renaissance Society of America, died in Princeton, New Jersey, on February 14, 1991, at the age of 85. Many of us knew him best as an Italian Renaissance scholar, but his work included important publications in eighteenth-century American thought and nineteenth-century German historiography. He also wrote on twentieth-century diplomatic history, on cultural history and its problems, on political power and academic responsibility, on Nazi totalitarianism, on the American Bicentennial, on Einstein's Europe and refugee professors at Bryn Mawr.

Born in Baden-Baden, in southern Germany in 1905, he grew up in Berlin and took his doctorate in 1931 at the University of Berlin where he studied with Friederich Meinecke. Ernst Kantorowicz was later to write that from Meinecke Gilbert "inherited his vivid interest in both the history of practical politics and the history of political ideas, that is, in the interplay of practice and thought. And like his teacher, he straddled from the very beginning the history of the Renaissance and that of modern times."

That interest in the Italian Renaissance was nurtured by a family whose traditional gift to its young males, upon their completion of the lycée, was a trip to Rome. In Gilbert's case, the inflation of post World War I prevented such a trip, but he had prepared for it by reading Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, a work he was to comment upon for much of his lifetime and to which he returned at its end. It was not until after his doctorate that Gilbert went to Italy where he spent two years in the Florentine archives and from which he chose to go to England, after Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933. After several years at the University of Cambridge where he was a Research Associate in the Faculty of History, he came to the United States in 1936, teaching at a number of American colleges—Scripps, Colorado, Brooklyn. In 1939 he came to the Institute for Advanced Study as an assistant to Professor Edward M. Earle until 1943. During World War II he went to Washington where he served for three years with the Research and Analysis Branch, Office of Strategic Services, and in

1946, he went to the Department of State. His government work during this period included translations of the German documents which Winston Churchill was later to acknowledge in his history of *The Second World War: Closing the Ring* (1951): "The American translations of the secret records of [Hitler's May 20, 1940, conference] and other German conferences are taken from the manuscript in the University of Pennsylvania Library, annotated by Mr. Felix Gilbert. They are a valuable contribution to the story of the war." This particular work led directly to his earliest publication in this country, *Hitler Directs His War: The Secret Records of His Daily Military Conferences* (1951).

From the government, Gilbert went to Bryn Mawr College where he was a professor in the Department of History from 1946–1962. There he pursued his several interests, teaching Modern European History and Renaissance History. In 1952, he edited, with Gordon A. Craig, *The Diplomats, 1919–1939* and in 1961 he published *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy*. Indeed, modern history, for Gilbert, was always to include American as well as European history, a perspective he may well have derived from the subject of his doctoral dissertation, Johann Droysen, the nineteenth-century German historian whose lectures on "The Wars of Liberation" had begun with the struggle of the English colonies for their independence.

In 1962, he returned to the Institute for Advanced Study as a Professor in the School of Historical Studies, and there he remained until his death, as active and prolific after his retirement in 1975 as he had been before. Among the many publications of these three decades were *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (1965); *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present* (1970); *History: Choice and Commitment* (1977); *The Pope, His Banker and Venice* (1980); *A European Past: Memoirs 1905–1945* (1988); and *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (1990). He continued to write articles and essays on modern history and edited, together with Peter Paret, a second revised edition on *Makers of Modern Strategy* (1986).

In all his works he knew the value of detail, and he delighted in richly specific sources such as Marin Sanudo's *Diaries*, volumes of which filled his office for his recent research on the purchase of office by Venetian patricians in the early sixteenth century. The subtle interplay between the observing individual and his world he had himself experienced and later analyzed in the events of his own Ber-

lin childhood and student years. A telling anecdote in his *Memoirs* recalls how, as a young boy, he had been told that all his toys must be burned because they were contaminated by his bout with scarlet fever. But when the doors behind which he had been quarantined were opened, “there, in front of me on the floor, were all the toys with which I had played during my illness. . . . For the first time in my highly organized and strictly regulated childhood I had an experience that I would have many times in the future . . . that unexpected things happen in life, that one never knows what will happen.” The role of the unanticipated; the limits of human rationality; the tension between human possibility and limiting circumstances—these interested him. So might a Machiavelli, handling the kaleidoscopic communications of the Florentine Chancellery, seek, in all that flux, what Gilbert once described as “the fleeting moment of control.”

Recognized with honorary degrees by a number of universities, among them Berlin in 1980, Bologna in 1982, and both Harvard and Yale in 1987, he also received the first Award for Excellence in Scholarship from the American Historical Association in 1985. His chief legacy—beyond his many books, essays, and articles—lies in the courtesy and concern he brought to the work of younger scholars, especially in the field of Renaissance studies. Nor should his sense of *convivium* go unrepresented, and I will close with a personal recollection.

It was the summer of 1948. I was travelling with a college friend in Italy, after graduating from Bryn Mawr College, where I had written my senior thesis on Machiavelli under Gilbert’s direction. We happened to meet in Florence, and Gilbert thereupon organized an evening together with some young American historians of his acquaintance. Off we went, a group of five, to Fiesole: Gilbert as *cicerone*, myself, my friend Geraldine Warburg—whose European relatives Gilbert had known in earlier days—and John Clive and Charlie Breunig, at that time graduate students at Harvard. Not even Felix Gilbert’s gentle reserve and courtly formality could disguise his palpable satisfaction in having put together this impromptu party which he cheerfully led up into the warm Tuscan hillside. There we pleasantly dined and talked on a terrace overlooking the Renaissance city far beneath us, as it darkened into the dusk, its Duomo long visible in the last sunlight.

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, Patricia H. Labalme  
PRINCETON