

**SEVENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY SPEECH
1 FEBRUARY 2006
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND**

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Post-prandial oratory is not an art-form. There is no anthology of after dinner speeches or even a digest. Much drinking, little thinking, Swift admonished, though Browning saw truth peeping over the glass's edge when dinner was done.

As you get older, perhaps I might reflect, time goes quicker, even for historians: it is hardly worth taking the Christmas decorations down. Nothing seems to get better. And things—and people—get stranger. Why do students have safety pins in their eyebrows? Why do adolescents suck bottles? Why are joggers wired for sound? But of course it's the old who are getting 'stranger'.

As you physically come apart, however, it may be that mentally things come together. Maybe that is another illusion, a kind of intellectual carphology. But I hope there is something in it.

One of the requirements of employment was often to teach in fields other than one's specialty, which was always a challenge, sometimes a burden, and more than occasionally not only of intrinsic interest but of advantage to the specialty: it might put it into a larger context, and offer perhaps unanticipated but stimulating opportunities for comparison. One of the opportunities of retirement—away from teaching and administration—is to read outside one's field, whether purposefully or serendipitously, or, as in the present case, both.

Planning, as part of an opera tour, to visit Poland for the first time, I wanted to amplify my rather attenuated recollections of its history. And, due for a reward as a reader of what even I thought a long typescript for a university press, I chose a copy of the second edition of Norman Davies' two-volume history, *God's Playground*.² Reading that was rewarding itself,

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² Davies, *God's Playground*, I, p. 30.

notwithstanding the somewhat uneven way in which the first edition had been updated and the large number of what seem to be processing or scanning errors. It is a magnificent work, worthy of its extraordinary subject, Homeric in task and achievement. But what—other than as daunting evidence of historiographical success—could it contribute to my specialty, the history of Southeast Asia?

The direct involvement of Poles and Poland is surely limited. At a time when there was no Poland on the map—only in the hearts of Poles, as they would say—a Pole who became a major English novelist, Joseph Conrad,³ was accumulating knowledge of the archipelago that he turned to account in *Lord Jim*, and that G. J. Resink was subsequently also to turn to account. Reconstituted as the People's Republic, Poland was to be a member of the post-Geneva international control commission in the former Indo-China, standing for a Communist 'bloc' led by a super-power whose patronage it then both needed and wanted to limit. But if Southeast Asia does not feature in Davies' epic, his account furnishes opportunities for comparison, especially for a historian who sees it as a region but does not want that to ghettoise the treatment of its historical experience, and for reflection, for one who is prepared to question the assumptions behind the concept of 'orientalism' and its deployment.

The nature of states and the concept of frontiers came to a comparing mind quite early in a reading of the book:

In times when land was in superabundant supply and people alone had political value, there was no point whatsoever in defining the territory of the state or of staking out its boundaries with a tape measure. Rulers were less concerned to claim land as a whole than to dominate the people who could work and develop the scattered oases of settlement and industry. Political power radiated from a few centres of authority, whose sphere of influence constantly waxed and waned, and very frequently overlapped. These centres can best be likened to magnets, and the people living in between them, to iron filings pulled hither and thither by fluctuating and conflicting magnetic fields.⁴

That is Davies on Poland. But does it not echo Wolters on Southeast Asia, even though he used a different metaphor? 'Princes described their realm not in terms of acreage but in terms of the people who obeyed their orders, or sought their protection.'⁵ 'In the early period, organized raiding

³ Born Josef Teodor Konrad Natecz Korzeniowski (1857-1924) in Ukraine of Polish descent; Anglicized his name while in England where he resided and worked. (Ed.)

⁴ Norman Davies, *God's Playground*, I, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

constituted an important sector of the primitive economy.’⁶ Such sentences might be found in a history of Southeast Asia, maritime, ‘oriental’, though it might be. They surely point to common issues in the building of states as well as to regional variants.

In Poland the main ‘magnets’ were to be the magnates. ‘The growth of large numbers of quarrelsome, peacock-minded clients, sworn to uphold the honour and interests of their patron, and dependent for their promotion and livelihood on the successful prosecution of his whims and feuds, gradually undermined the workings of government at both the central and the provincial level.’⁷ The historian of Southeast Asia—specialist in patron-client relations—would like to borrow the plumage of that sentence. The ‘Republic’ of Poland-Lithuania of the early modern period was vast and for a time—in what a leading historian of Southeast Asia has called the ‘age of commerce’—wealthy: the Dutch and the Danzigers mobilized its grain exports. But it failed to utilize that phase for building the strong monarchies that, among others, its neighbours, Prussia and Russia, were to build, and that, with Maria-Theresa’s Austria, were to fall on it in 1772, and eliminate it altogether in the 1790s.

‘Although victorious powers habitually stripped their defeated rivals of territorial possessions and were not averse to dividing the spoils of India, America, or Africa, there is no other instance when they deliberately annihilated one of Europe’s historic states in cold blood’, Davies asserts.⁸ Nevertheless, they did ‘partition’ Poland, a word later used for their treatment of Africa. No ideological justification was offered, nothing approaching the ‘orientalism’ allegedly a factor in the ‘partition’ of Asia. ‘Poland is constantly plunged in disorder’, declared Count Vorontsov (1714-67), chancellor of the Russian state that had ensured that it could not put its affairs in order; ‘as long as she keeps her present constitution, she does not deserve to be considered among the European powers.’⁹ Frederick the Great (1712-86) was to ‘compare his Polish victims to defenceless Iroquois Indians’.¹⁰ What was operating was a cynical *raison d’etat*. And that might provide the best clue to understanding the ‘partitions’ the ‘imperialists’ effected overseas.

Another aspect of the process suggests another comparison. The Poles were not themselves inactive. The more, however, they tried to reform, the more they were subject to Russian intervention:

On each occasion, ... the Empress of Russia was obliged to seek the consent and the assistance of her Prussian or Austrian rivals. On each

⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁸ Ibid., p. 386.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 396.

occasion, as the price of their consent and assistance, Berlin or Vienna demanded a slice of Polish territory. In this way, each Partition was the logical consequence of an attempt to launch a programme of reform.¹¹

The Republic was ‘destroyed because it repeatedly tried to reform itself’.¹² That was, of course, often the most dangerous moment for Asian states, too. Much depended on the attitude of the outside powers. Would they all join in? Would some ignore what others were doing? Would they restrain or provoke each other? The differing trajectories of China and of Burma come to mind.

In the 1770s a Polish exile, Maurice Benyowsky (1746-86), led a revolt against the Russians in Kamchatka, and, escaping, warned the Japanese that they were bent on conquest. For the Japanese reformers a century later, Poland offered an example to be avoided. ‘If a country is divided among a multitude of petty rulers, ... the lines of policy are multiplied, inasmuch as each prince will seek his own advantage and devise schemes for his own gain’, wrote Kido Takayoshi (1833-77) after his visit to Europe. ‘How could they ever withstand a powerful enemy whose forces were harmoniously united?’¹³ The Japanese enjoyed a measure of luck as well as good judgment. No other power had intervened in their civil war.

Japan’s subsequent war with Russia prompted disturbances in Russian Poland, as Davies relates, including a demonstration in Warsaw that preceded the Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg early in 1905 by three months. Nationalist leaders also made contact with the Japanese. The moderate Roman Dmowski opposed ‘a Japanese foray into Polish affairs’, lest it prompted the Tsar’s government to abandon any prospect of constitutional reform. By contrast Josef Pilsudski urged the creation of a Polish legion and suggested that Polish troops in the Tsar’s army in Manchuria would be ready to desert. ‘In the event, the Japanese government took no decisive action.’¹⁴

Though it was itself the augury of a possible threat, Japan’s victory, hard won as it was, inspired the early nationalists of Southeast Asia: a ‘Western’ power might be defeated. Yet Russia was hardly typical, and Russians had convinced themselves of their special sympathy with the ‘East’. A kind of ‘occidentalism’ was as misleading as ‘orientalism’. What counted, as the Poles had been made to realise, were the hard realisms of power, and Southeast Asians were to be reminded of that in the Pacific War (1941-5).

Nationalism might, however, be counted among those realisms. Poland itself, partly on the map during the period of the Congress kingdom, had been wiped off it again after the uprising of 1863. Yet it had been ‘partitioned on

¹¹ Ibid., p. 397.

¹² Ibid., p. 398.

¹³ *The Meiji Japan*, p. 102.

¹⁴ Davies, *God’s Playground*, II, p. 273.

the eve of the birth of Nationalism and Liberalism, and thus became a symbol of all those people for whom self-determination and the consent of the governed provide the guiding principles of political life'.¹⁵ That seems not to have extended to those in Southeast Asia before the First World War (1914-18). But the recreation of a Polish state in 1918-19 was certainly a testimony to the power of the ideology of self-determination, even if the hopes of the Koreans and the Vietnamese had been denied.

Nationalism is not only a struggle to liberate; it is a struggle to build a state. The interwar Second Republic was a large Poland, where Polish speakers formed barely two-thirds of the population. The post-war People's Republic was smaller and, partly as a result, but also as a result of the holocaust, of widespread killing and population movements, far more exclusively 'Polish'. Its frontiers, like of those of Southeast Asian states, were determined by outsiders. They, too, were predominantly responsible for making its population so largely 'Polish'.

Fortunately, no such moves were made in Southeast Asia. But there has been an emphasis on assimilation. Whether that can now be displaced by a multi-ethnic or multicultural approach perhaps still remains to be seen. It is, however, difficult not to share some of the sympathy Davies extends to the First Republic and its 'noble democracy'. The old Polish nobleman and the modern democrat are, as he says, both concerned 'to combat the power of the state' and its excesses.¹⁶ Perhaps we may extend the admiration to the tolerance it was able to extend to the diverse peoples within the Republic.

I have tested your tolerance tonight. After all, as Alexander Pope (1688-1774) puts it, a birthday is but the funeral of a former year. But on this occasion—made so memorable by your presence—I recall how often I have tested it and how much support I have received, now and over many years, from family, and from friends and colleagues such as yourselves.

¹⁵ Ibid, I, p. 396.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 283.