

Introduction

All my life, I have been intrigued by the gap between appearances and reality. Things are never quite as they seem. I was born a subject of the British Empire, and as a child, read in my *Children's Encyclopaedia* that 'our empire' was one 'on which the sun never set'. I saw that there was more red on the map than any other colour, and was delighted. Before long, I was watching in disbelief as the imperial sunset blazed across the post-war skies amidst seas of blood and mayhem. Reality, as later revealed, belied outward appearances of unlimited power and permanence.

In my encyclopedia I also read that Mount Everest, at 29,002 feet, was the highest peak in the world and was named after the surveyor general of British India, Col. Sir George Everest. I naturally fell for the unwritten assumption, as I was supposed to, that the pinnacle of the earth was British; and I was duly impressed. It all looked very straightforward. By the time I received my copy of the Coronation Edition of Sir John Hunt's *The Ascent of Everest* as a Christmas present in 1953, of course, India had left the Empire. But I have since learned that Mount Everest had never belonged either to India or to the Empire. Since the King of Nepal did not grant Everest's men permission to enter his country, the mountain had been measured from a very great distance; 29,002 feet was not in consequence its correct height; the mountain's English name was adopted as an act of self-aggrandisement, and its most authentic names are Sagarmatha (in Nepali) and Chomolangma (in Tibetan).¹ Knowledge, I have been forced to admit, is no less fluid than the circumstances in which it is obtained.

As a boy, I was taken on several occasions to Welsh-speaking Wales. Being endowed with a very Welsh name, I immediately felt at home and gained a lasting affinity with the country. On visiting friends in a hill village near Bethesda, also Davieses, I met with people who did not normally speak English, and was given a present of my first English–Welsh dictionary, T. Gwynn Jones's *Geiriadur*;² it made me a lifelong collector

of foreign languages, though not alas a master of Welsh. Seeing the English castles at Conwy, Harlech and Beaumaris (usually and wrongly called 'Welsh castles'), I sympathized more with the conquered than with the conquerors, and on reading somewhere that the Welsh name for 'England', *Lloegr*, meant 'the Lost Land', I fell for the fancy, imagining what a huge sense of loss and forgetting the name expresses. A learned colleague has since told me that my imagination had outrun the etymology. Yet as someone brought up in English surroundings, I never cease to be amazed that everywhere which we now call 'England' was once not English at all. This amazement underlies much of what is written in *Vanished Kingdoms*. Dover, after all, or the Avon, are pure Welsh names.

As a teenager, singing badly on the back row of the school choir, I was particularly attracted to a piece by Charles Villiers Stanford. For some reason, the stoical words and languorous melody of 'They told me Heraclitus' struck a congenial chord. So I went home and looked him up in my copy of Blakeney's *Smaller Classical Dictionary* and found he was the 'weeping Greek philosopher' from the sixth century BC. It was Heraclitus who said that 'everything is in flux' and 'You can never cross the same river twice'. He was the pioneer of the idea of transience, and he features early in my schoolboy notebook of quotations:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead.
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake,
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.³

Heraclitus and his nightingales are not far beneath the surface of my work either.

As a school-leaver, I followed the advice of my history master to spend the summer vacation reading Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, together with his *Autobiography*. Gibbon's subject was, in his own words, 'the greatest perhaps and most awful scene in the history of mankind'.⁴ I have never read anything to surpass it. Its magnificent narrative demonstrates that the lifespan even of the mightiest states is finite.

Years later, as a professional historian, I plunged into the history of Central and Eastern Europe. My first assignment as a lecturer at the University of London was to prepare a course of ninety lectures on Polish history. The centrepiece of the course was devoted to the Commonwealth or *Rzeczpospolita* of Poland-Lithuania, which at its conception in 1569 was the largest state in Europe (or at least the master of our continent's largest tract of inhabited lands). Nonetheless, in little more than two decades at the end of the eighteenth century, the Polish-Lithuanian state was destroyed so comprehensively that few people today have even heard of it. And it was not the only casualty. The Republic of Venice was laid low in the same era, as was the Holy Roman Empire.

Throughout most of my academic career, the Soviet Union was the biggest beast in my field of study, and one of the world's two superpowers. It possessed the largest territory in the world, a vast arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons and an unparalleled array of security services. None of its guns or policemen could save it. One day in 1991 it disappeared from the map of the globe, and it has never been seen since.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when I came to write the history of *The Isles*,⁵ I began to wonder if the days of the state in which I was born and live, the United Kingdom, might also be numbered. I decided that they were. My strict, Nonconformist upbringing had taught me to look askance at the trappings of power. My head still rings with the glorious, measured cadences of 'St Clement':

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.⁶

To her very great credit, Queen Victoria, Empress of India, asked for this hymn to be sung at her Diamond Jubilee.

Historians and their publishers spend inordinate time and energy retailing the history of everything that they take to be powerful, prominent and impressive. They flood the bookshops, and their readers' minds, with tales of great powers, of great achievements, of great men and women, of victories, heroes and wars – especially the wars which 'we' are supposed to have won – and of the great evils which we opposed. In 2010, 380 books on the Third Reich were published in Great Britain alone.⁷ If not 'Might is Right', their motto could well be 'Nothing Succeeds Like Success'.

Historians usually focus their attention on the past of countries that still exist, writing hundreds and thousands of books on British history, French history, German history, Russian history, American history, Chinese history, Indian history, Brazilian history or whatever. Whether consciously or not, they are seeking the roots of the present, thereby putting themselves in danger of reading history backwards. As soon as great powers arise, whether the United States in the twentieth century or China in the twenty-first, the call goes out for offerings on American History or Chinese History, and siren voices sing that today's important countries are also those whose past is most deserving of examination, that a more comprehensive spectrum of historical knowledge can be safely ignored. In this jungle of information about the past, the big beasts invariably win out. Smaller or weaker countries have difficulty in making their voices heard, and dead kingdoms have almost no advocates at all.

Our mental maps are thus inevitably deformed. Our brains can only form a picture from the data that circulates at any given time; and the available data is created by present-day powers, by prevailing fashions and by accepted wisdom. If we continue to neglect other areas of the past, the blank spaces in our minds are reinforced, and we pile more and more knowledge into those compartments of which we are already aware. Partial knowledge becomes ever more partial, and ignorance becomes self-perpetuating.

Matters are not improved by the trend towards ultra-specialization among professionals. The tsunami of information in today's Internet-dominated world is overwhelming; the number of journals to be read and of new sources to be consulted is multiplying geometrically, and many young historians feel compelled to restrict their efforts to tiny periods of time and minute patches of territory. They are drawn into discussing their work in arcane, academic jargon addressed to ever dwindling coterie of their like-minded peers, and the defensive cry goes up on every hand: 'That is not my period.' In consequence, since academic debate – indeed knowledge itself – progresses through newcomers challenging the methods and conclusions of their predecessors, the difficulties for historians of all ages in breaking out into unexplored territory, or of attempting to paint large-scale, inclusive panoramas, are rapidly increasing. With few exceptions – some of them of great value – the professionals stick to the well-worn ruts.

In this regard, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that one of the great names of my youth had spotted the trend long since. My own tutor at Oxford, A. J. P. Taylor, roamed widely and fearlessly over many

aspects of British and European history, setting us all a good example.⁸ But I did not realize until recently that Taylor's great rival, Hugh Trevor-Roper, had posed the problem in characteristically elegant fashion:

Today most professional historians 'specialise'. They choose a period, sometimes a very brief period, and within that period they strive, in desperate competition with ever-expanding evidence, to know all the facts. Thus armed, they can comfortably shoot down any amateurs who blunder . . . into their heavily fortified field . . . Theirs is a static world. They have a self-contained economy, a Maginot Line and large reserves . . . but they have no philosophy. For historical philosophy is incompatible with such narrow frontiers. It must apply to humanity in any period. To test it, a historian must dare to travel abroad, even in hostile country; to express it he must be ready to write essays on subjects on which he may be ill-equipped to write books.⁹

I wish I had read that earlier. Although Taylor apparently admired Trevor-Roper's *Essays*,¹⁰ he did not recommend them to his students.

The above observations may be worth considering further, if only because mainstream history-making persists in its addiction to great powers, to narratives about the roots of the present and to ultra-specialized topics. The resultant image of life in the past is necessarily deficient. In reality, life is far more complex; it consists of failures, near misses and brave tries as well as triumphs and successes. Mediocrity, ungrasped opportunities and false starts, though unsensational, are commonplace. The panorama of the past is indeed studded with greatness, but it is filled in the main with lesser powers, lesser people, lesser lives and lesser emotions. Most importantly, students of history need to be constantly reminded of the transience of power, for transience is one of the fundamental characteristics both of the human condition and of the political order. Sooner or later, all things come to an end. Sooner or later, the centre cannot hold. All states and nations, however great, bloom for a season and are replaced.

Vanished Kingdoms has been conceived with such sober but not particularly pessimistic truths in mind. Several of the case studies deal with states 'that once were great'. Some deal with realms that did not aspire to greatness. Others describe entities that never had a chance. All come from Europe, and all form a part of that strange jumble of crooked timbers which we call 'European History'.

'Vanished Kingdoms' is a phrase, like 'Lost Worlds', which summons up many images. It recalls intrepid explorers trekking over the heights

of the Himalayas or through the depths of the Amazonian jungle; or archaeologists, digging down through long-lost layers in the sites of Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt.¹¹ The myth of Atlantis is never far away.¹² Readers of the Old Testament are especially familiar with the concept. There were seven biblical kingdoms, we are told, between ancient Egypt and the Euphrates, and dedicated Old Testament scholars have laboured long and hard to establish a framework of dates and sites. Not much can be said with certainty about Ziklag, Edom, Zoboh, Moab, Gilead, Philistia and Geshur.¹³ Most information about them consists of fleeting allusions, such as: 'But Absalom fled, and went to Talmai, the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day.'¹⁴ Today, after millennia of change and conflict, two of the would-be successor states to those seven kingdoms have been locked for decades in near impasse. One of them, despite overwhelming military power, has not been able to impose true peace; the other, already near-strangled, may never see the light of day.

Of course, human nature dictates that everyone is lulled into thinking that disasters only happen to others. Imperial nations, and ex-imperial nations, are particularly reluctant to recognize how quickly reality moves on. Having lived a charmed life in the mid-twentieth century, and having held out against the odds in our 'Finest Hour', the British risk falling into a state of self-delusion which tells them that their condition is still as fine, that their institutions are above compare, that their country is somehow eternal. The English in particular are blissfully unaware that the disintegration of the United Kingdom began in 1922, and will probably continue; they are less aware of complex identities than are the Welsh, the Scots or the Irish. Hence, if the end does come, it will come as a surprise. Those who seriously believe 'There'll always be an England' are whistling in the dark. And yet it was one of England's most enduring poets, writing his 'Elegy' in the tranquil shade of the churchyard at Stoke Poges, who summed up the certainty facing states and individuals alike. Thomas Gray had the measure of our essential vanity:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.¹⁵

Sooner or later the final blow always falls. Since the defeat of the Greater German Reich in 1945, obituaries have been written for several European states. They include the German Democratic Republic (1990),

the Soviet Union (1991), Czechoslovakia (1992) and the Federation of Yugoslavia (2006). There will undoubtedly be more. The difficult question is, who will be next? Judging by its current dysfunctionality, Belgium could become Europe's next Great Auk, or perhaps Italy. It is impossible to say. And no one can forecast with any certainty whether the latest infant to join Europe's family of nations, the Republic of Kosovo, will sink or swim. But anyone imagining that the law of transience does not apply to them is living in *Nephelokokkygia* (a word coined by Aristophanes to make his audience stop and think).

Modern education may have something to answer for here. In the days, not too distant, when all educated Europeans were brought up on a mixture of the Christian Gospels and the ancient classics, everyone was all too familiar with the idea of mortality, for states as well as individuals. Though Christian precepts were widely disregarded, they did teach of a kingdom 'not of this world'. The classics, propagating supposedly universal values, were the product of a revered but dead civilization. The 'Glory that was Greece' and the 'Grandeur that was Rome' had evaporated thousands of years before; they suffered the fate of Carthage and Tyre, but were still alive in people's minds.

Somehow my own education at school and university must have slipped through before the rot set in. At Bolton School I learned Latin, started Greek, and took my turn at the daily Bible readings in the Great Hall; my history and geography teachers, Bill Brown and Harold Porter, both encouraged their sixth form pupils to read books in foreign languages. During my year in France, at Grenoble, I sat in the library ploughing my way through much of Michelet and Lavisie in the hope that something would rub off. At Magdalen College, K. B. McFarlane, A. J. P. Taylor and John Stoye, a matchless trio of tutors, awaited me. In my very first tutorial, McFarlane told me, in a voice as gentle as his cats, 'not to believe everything that you read in books'; Taylor was to tell me later to forget a doctorate and write a book myself, because 'D.Phils are for second-raters'; his politics were puzzling, his pose to his pupils avuncular, his lecturing magnificent and his prose style delicious. Stoye, who was researching the Siege of Vienna at the time, helped push my horizons to the East. As a postgraduate at Sussex, I studied Russian, only to be cured of all pan-Slav illusions by a long spell in Poland. At the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, I found myself in the care of senior historians, like Henryk Batowski and Jozef Gierowski, whose careers were devoted to limiting the inroads of a totalitarian regime, and who as a result had a passionate belief in the existence of historical truth.

Back in Oxford at St Antony's, I sat at the feet of giants such as William Deakin, Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley, who rolled history, politics, literature and hair-raising wartime escapades into one; my supervisor was the late Harry Willetts, Polonist, Russicist and translator of Solzhenitsyn; his speciality seminars took place in the kitchen of his house on Church Walk, where one heard at first hand from his Polish wife, Halina, what deportation to Stalinist Siberia really involved. When I finally found an academic post at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies in London, I stepped into the shadow of Hugh Seton-Watson, a polyglot of immense learning, who never forgot throughout the Cold War that Europe consisted of two halves. Hugh wrote a review of my first book, anonymously as the practice of the *TLS* then was, confessing to it some ten years later. All of us at SSEES were struggling to convey the realities of closed societies to audiences living in an open one; we were all tending slender intellectual flames that were in danger of blowing out. And that was an education in itself.

Today the barbarians have broken into the garden. Most schoolchildren have never met with Homer or Virgil; some receive no religious instruction of any sort; and the teaching of modern languages has almost ground to a halt. History itself has to fight for a reduced place in the curriculum alongside apparently more important subjects such as Economics, or IT, or Sociology or Media Studies. Materialism and consumerism are rife. Young people have to learn in a cocoon filled with false optimism. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they grow up with very little sense of the pitiless passage of time.

The task of the historian, therefore, goes beyond the duty of tending the generalized memory. When a few events in the past are remembered pervasively, to the exclusion of equally deserving subjects, there is a need for determined explorers to stray from the beaten track and to recover some of the less fashionable memory sites. It is akin to the work of the ecologists and environmentalists who care for endangered species, and of those who, by studying the fate of the dodo and the dinosaur, build up a true picture both of our planet's condition and of its prospects. The present exploration of a selection of extinct realms has been pursued with a similar sense of curiosity. The historian who sets out on the trail of The 'Kingdom of the Rock' or The 'Republic of One Day' shares the excitement of people who track down the lairs of the snow leopard or the Siberian tiger. 'I saw pale kings,' the poet recalls, 'and princes too. / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all . . .'¹⁶

The theme of mankind's hubris, of course, is not new. It is older than

the Greeks who invented the word, and who, in the period of their greatness, discovered the statues of the Egyptian pharaohs already half-buried in the desert sands.

‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.¹⁷

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From the day of this book’s conception I have concentrated on two priorities: to highlight the contrast between times present and times past, and to explore the workings of historical memory. These priorities suggested that each of the studies should have a three-part structure. Part I of every chapter therefore paints a sketch of some European location as it appears today. Part II then tells the narrative of a ‘vanished kingdom’ that once inhabited the same location. Part III examines the extent to which the vanished kingdom has either been remembered or forgotten; usually it is poorly remembered or half-forgotten, or completely derelict.

I have also been at pains to present vanished kingdoms drawn from as many of the main periods and regions of European history as space would allow. Tolosa, for example, comes from Western Europe, Litva and Galicia from the East. Alt Clud and Éire are based in the British Isles, Borussia in the Baltic, Tsernagora in the Balkans, and Aragon in Iberia and the Mediterranean. The chapter covering the ‘Five, Six or Seven Kingdoms’ of Burgundia tells a medieval story that straddles modern France and Germany; Sabaudia deals mainly with the early modern period while linking France, Switzerland and Italy; and Rosenau and CCCP are confined to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It goes without saying that the subject of vanished kingdoms cannot be exhausted by the limited collection of examples presented here. The ‘history of half-forgotten Europe’ is far more extensive than any partial selection can cover. Many earlier candidates have had to be dropped, if only for reasons of space. One such study, ‘Kerno’, examines King Mark’s kingdom in post-Roman Cornwall, and is decorated by reflections on the theme of cultural genocide and excerpts from the work of the Cornish poet Norman Davies. Another study, ‘De Grote Appel: A Short-Lived Dutch Colony’, sets out the history of New Amsterdam before it

was transformed into New York. A third, ‘Carnaro: The Regency of the First *duce*’, tells the extraordinary story of Gabriele d’Annunzio’s take-over in Fiume in 1919 and concludes with his exquisite poem, ‘*La pioggia nel pineto*’, ‘Rain in the Pinewood’.

In these endeavours, I have inevitably relied heavily on the work of others. No historian can have a thorough knowledge of all parts and periods of European history, and all good generalists feast heartily on the dishes served up by their specialist confrères. Anyone setting out into unfamiliar territory needs to be armed with maps and guides and the accounts of those who went before. In the early stages of research, I gained enormously from the advice of specialist colleagues such as the late Rees Davies on the Old North, David Abulafia on Aragon, or Michał Giedroyc on Lithuania, and almost every chapter has benefited greatly from expert studies and scholarly consultations. In short, every single section of my little cathedral has been built from the bricks, stones and drawings of someone else.

I have always loved Plato’s metaphor of the ‘ship of state’. The idea of a great vessel, with its helmsman, crew and complement of passengers, ploughing its way across the oceans of time, is irresistible. So, too, are the many poems which celebrate it:

*O navis, referent in mare te novi
fluctus! O quid agis? Fortiter occupa
portum! Nonne vides ut
nudum remigio latus . . .*¹⁸

Or again:

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!¹⁹

These lines from Longfellow were written out by President Roosevelt in his own hand, and sent to Winston Churchill on 20 January 1941. They were accompanied by a note which said, ‘I think this verse applies to your people as it does to us.’²⁰

The same thoughts come to mind when brains are racked about kingdoms that have vanished. For ships of state do not sail on for ever. They sometimes ride the storms, and sometimes founder. On occasion they

limp into port to be refitted; on other occasions, damaged beyond repair, they are broken up; or they sink, slipping beneath the surface to a hidden resting place among the barnacles and the fishes.

In this connection, another string of images presents itself, in which the historian becomes a beachcomber and treasure-seeker, a collector of flotsam and jetsam, a raiser of wrecks, a diver of the deep, scouring the seabed to recover what was lost. This book certainly sits comfortably in the category of historical salvage. It garners the traces of ships of state that sank, and it invites the reader, if only on the page, to watch with delight as the stricken galleons straighten their fallen masts, draw up their anchors, fill their sails and reset their course across the ocean swell.

Norman Davies
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