

## JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE 22 NOVEMBER 2012

### SPEECH BY WŁODZIMIEZ BOLECKI

The history of the three Punic War belongs to the accepted canon of knowledge on the history of Europe. Countless narratives and works of visual art portray Hannibal's passage over the Alps and the destruction of Carthage, i.e the events that actually took place three thousand years ago. Meanwhile, paradoxically enough, we do know a little about the two other wars that rolled over China in the middle of the 19th century. They are known as the « *opium wars* » and their consequences still have the paramount influence on shaping the mutual relations between Europe and Asia.

A brief summary is needed to describe the history of the « *opium wars* » presented superbly by Julia Lovell : Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the British paid Chinese merchants for their luxury goods with an increasing amount of opium supplied by the British East India Company's monopoly. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese, well aware of dire consequences of opium smoking for the public's health, prohibited the importation of opium, outlawed opium traffic and denounced heavy penalties on any contravention of the interdiction. The British who earned enormous amounts of money through the opium considered it a *casus belli*. As a result of losing the « *opium wars* », the Chinese opened their sea ports and land frontiers to the opium trade on a legal basis. In actual fact they have been forced to open unconditionally their markets. There were Great Britain, France, USA, and Russia that took advantage of the situation. It led to establishing the British legacy in Hong Kong. The Christian missionaries were granted property rights in China.

Julia Lovell reports these events from the standpoint of a historian and a writer, a professional translator and a commentator of current political events. The « *Opium War* », in her book, is thus presented not only as a part of the political and economic history of the Western colonialism but most emphatically as the War of cultures in which both sides hardly knew and barely understood each other. The « *opium wars* » also reveal themselves as the War of national languages and mentalities, cultural behaviours and civilizational mistakes.

For the Europeans they constitute a myth of a historical triumph over the oldest country in the world and prove the successful export of the idea of a free trade. For the Chinese they became a symbol of humiliation and the cause of a civilizational decay affecting millions of victims both in the following decades and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With a superb display of erudition and rare sense of humor, in an ironic and sometimes even sarcastic manner, step by step, Julia Lovell challenges a number of mental stereotypes and historical taboos. Most of all, she conveys a bitter knowledge of our civilization.

Curiously enough, the words of Cato the Elder who ordered to destroy Carthage (« *Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam* ») can be found in any dictionary of famous quotations. But who remember the words of Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister of England at the time of the two « *Opium Wars* » : « *England has no eternal allies, and no eternal enemies, only eternal interests* ». In her superb and wise book, Julia Lovell demonstrated the most false way of understanding of the « *eternity* » which can shape the politics of any country.

Julia Lovell helped me to realize that the British-Chinese « *Opium War* » had also left their trace in European literature, not direct but still very strong. The ships of the East India Company involved in the opium trade were captained by Joseph Conrad in the 1880s. The action of a number of his novels and short stories takes place along opium trade routes between India and China, though the action of his most famous *Heart of Darkness* had been located in Africa. Events related to the « *Opium War* » also had their « *hearts of darkness* » as demonstrated by Julia Lovell.

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