

A Traveller in the Czech Lands

Alan R. H. Baker

arb1000@cam.ac.uk

Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 3PA, United Kingdom

A note of explanation

In September 1985 I visited Czechoslovakia for two weeks to learn about the practice of historical geography there. My hosts took me twice to operatic performances in Prague and towards the conclusion of my visit I produced a light-hearted account of it. At the request of Dr Leoš Jeleček, I have agreed that it can now be published, some 27 years later, on the occasion of the 15th International Conference of Historical Geographers being held in Prague in August 2012. A more sober account of my visit was published in *Area 18* (1986) pp. 223–228.

Alan R. H. Baker (Emmanuel College, Cambridge, UK)

Programme Notes for an Opera in three Acts entitled *A Traveller in the Czech Lands* or (to borrow from a relatively unknown English playwright) *All's Well that Ends Well*

ACT ONE

An English Gentleman, an educated doctor of philosophy and a dedicated historical geographer, arrives as a traveller in a foreign land where strange tongues are spoken so that almost every other name seems to end in *-ova* or *-anska*. The people of this country are very busy digging holes in the road and covering the buildings in a trelliswork of iron and wood; and on the streets they travel in large mechanical boxes which trundle along like centipedes.

But our fearless English Gentleman, with the help of an intelligent citizen of the country's principal and beautiful city, Prague, finds the castle of the Duke of the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History. [Our English Gentleman will discover later on that in this foreign land castles are numerous].

After many discussions, and also after many glasses of good Moravian wine, the Duke agrees it is time that his daughter – by name, *Historická Geografie* – should be introduced to the English Gentleman's son, in Cambridge, where they live in a Renaissance country house. The Gentleman's son seems to have much in common with the Duke's daughter, because the son is called *Historical Geography*. Having established this common bond, and having shown that he can think only of the beginning of a new kind of historical geography (a much more fertile historical geography) our English Gentleman bids farewell to the Duke, leaves his castle and sets forth to explore other parts of this strange but exciting land.

ACT TWO

In the midst of what must surely be a festival of the building workers (because there is so much repair and reconstruction work going on), the English Gentleman reaches Brno to seek others who share his passion for appreciating landscapes, especially historical landscapes. But at Brno the Regent of the district is too busy drawing maps for his next campaign in the name of Science and the Vice-Regent is out in the countryside, apparently looking for some villages which he has lost; a friendly steward of the castle talks with our English Gentleman about everything under the sun except historical geography.

Saddened and confused at not finding in Brno any people who share his passion for historical landscapes and fearing that there might also be none at Bratislava (where he had intended to go next), our English Gentleman swears to return to Prague and sends many messengers ahead to make arrangements. Unless he returns to Prague, he is afraid that his ideas will die for lack of attention, which would be a tragic end to such a promising beginning for his travels.

ACT THREE

On a bright, sunny, morning, our English Gentleman, on the point of exhaustion and weariness, comes to the bus station in Prague. He breathes in deeply and is immediately aware of its strange air, described by some of the inhabitants of the city as “polluted”, a condition about which some of the older generation of London also speak. In Prague he meets again the Duke of the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History, together with his army. The Gentleman and the Duke have more friendly discussions and together with another noble man from the Institute and accompanied by an Interpreter, they set out on a long adventure into the countryside, from dawn until dusk, to see how many castles and churches can be counted before night falls. They charge at speed around the countryside of Bohemia on an old but sturdy horse which roars and bellows its enjoyment at being able to jump over hundreds of holes and “level” crossings in one day. They see two kinds of castles: some are very old, with great towers in ruins – they are usually called Hussite or pre-Hussite; others are not so old but they look old – they have great towers usually belching smoke and they are usually called Power Stations or Chemical Plants.

After returning from this very successful campaign, there is close agreement between the Duke and our English Gentleman: a marriage is agreed between the young and beautiful Historická Geografie from the Czech Lands and the strong and powerful Historical Geography from Britain. A toast to their future together is drunk in a good, full-bodied, Moravian wine in the firm conviction that the two will live happily together.

Glad of this agreement, the English Gentleman reluctantly bids farewell to his new friends; he departs from their country with much sadness in his heart. But such, say the gods, is the reality of life: to be both glad and sad at the same time. As he leaves, trying to speak the language of this country, he expresses his gratitude by saying: “*Thanska – now that my Visitisallova*”.

The pictures took at the English gentleman's 2nd visit to Prague in 2006 to meet and check growth/progress of his son, Historical Geography from Britain, and Duke's daughter (Historická Geografie from Czechia) children.

Fig. 1: An English Gentleman and his grandchildren at one of Duke's castles Vyšehrad built in 10th century



Fig. 2: An English Gentleman goes to the Duke's Summer Palace in Bohemian Paradise named "The Bone", to reception by Duke, where a some toasts to their together future have been drunk



Fig. 3: The Duke's chamberlain shows to English Gentleman his Lord huge possessions in North Bohemia when standing at the top of hill "Mužský" (463 msl). See at the horizon natural frontier of Kingdom Bohemia, the ridge of Ještěd (the highest point 1 012 msl)



Fig. 4: An English Gentleman when delivering lecture to the Duke's court members concerning serious topic: "To be or not to be a historical geographer?"

