A graduate of the Harvard University, Patrice Dabrowski is a scholar with a renowned international output. She has oftentimes visited Poland to do archive or library queries or taking part in scholarly conferences. She has contributed to several congresses attended by foreign researchers of the history of Poland, which are held every five years in Cracow. Patrice Dabrowski has been awarded, among others, with the prestigious International Cultural Centre (Polish: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury) scholarship.

The study under review comes as a harvest of Dabrowski’s many years of studies in the area of history of Poland and Central Europe and experience gained in her work with American students. It fits well the historical narrative tradition prevalent in the English-language zone. *Poland* … deserves being considered as one of the most valuable synthetic depictions of the history
of Poland ever penned by an Anglo-Saxon author. It is noteworthy to remark that the United States and the United Kingdom see a new study of the like sort issued every three or four years, which makes a much more frequent appearance rate compared to Poland.

Any new adventurer whoever should like to face the history of Poland has to meet the challenge of what to do in order not to make his/her study a reduplication of any of the previously released ones, to avoid making it a compilation of someone else’s ideas – an imitative work, altogether. As is proved by the study in question, Patrice Dabrowski has been aware of these determinants, and managed to compile a really original work, both conceptually and constructionally. The study is composed of four basic sections, dealing, respectively, with ‘Poland in Europe’, ‘the Europe of Poland’, ‘Europe without Poland’, and ‘Poland in Europe and the World’. Such a concept has helped the author to easier and more effectively portray the specificity of Poland as a country, nation and state situated between the East and the West, that is, in Central Europe. In order to reinforce her stance, Dabrowski refers to Norman Davies’s catchphrase naming Poland ‘the heart of Europe’. Furthermore, the innovative structure proposed by the author has enabled her to describe the ‘central character’s’ history in a dynamic manner, taking into account the altering borders and legal-political systems. What is more, the history of Poland is thus depicted in a broader European and worldwide context. The comparative perspective assumed by the author is the book’s primary strong point, enabling the reader to watch Poland – the Commonwealth – drift away and approaching the centre of Europe and the world.

In most of the cases, authors of synthetic presentations of the history of Poland have tended to focus on times closer to ours, rather than distant from them – in line with the reversed pyramid rule. Some authors have covered the nine centuries of Poland’s history at a length comparable to that for the twentieth century alone. Dabrowski departs from this rule. She has probably decided that in order to understand Poland better, what a historian ought to do in the first place is to show the birth of the country’s statehood and society. This is why she makes the progress of the Slavs through the east and south of Europe and the emergence of the first Slavonic countries an important part of her considerations. The earliest Slavic legends are discussed exhaustively: Dabrowski sees them as the founding myths of three European countries – Rus’ (Ruthenia), Bohemia and Poland; so are the cultural and political effects of the assumption of Christianity. I am pleased to note that in her account of Polish mediaeval culture and science, the author takes a closer look on King Casimir III the Great’s foundation of the university in Cracow 1364 – an early academy in Central Europe, second only to its Prague peer. The report on the Battle of Grunwald/Tannenberg of 1410, the largest battle in the Middle Ages, is meticulous and compliant with the most
recent findings of mediaevalists, with a focus on the political and economic aftermath of the victory of the combined Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian forces. With its influence on the history of European culture and civilisation and on the neighbouring regions such as the Ottomans’ empire or Persia, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth comes to the fore in this study. It was the Commonwealth, the author believes, that has contributed the most to the common treasure trove of mankind. The origins of the country, rather untypical a formation given the European context of its time, are traced back to the Union of Krevo, 1385, and the early reigns of the Jagiellon house in Poland. The decline of Poland-Lithuania in late eighteenth century offered an opportunity for the author to summarise the four centuries of modern-age Poland. Dabrowski emphasises at several occasions that the Commonwealth’s impact on its adjacent countries or regions was pretty intense, the Polish language being used in communications between elites in the vast area extending from Constantinople to as far as Moscow, Königsberg, and Stockholm.

Basing on the most recent studies of Polish and international scholars, Dabrowski refers to the constituent of statehood that have proved the most characteristic for Poland-Lithuania. First of all, in the opinion of this author, the union was pretty fundamental to the formation and structure of the common state. It was already at the beginning of the fifteenth century that a team of Cracow-based lawyers elaborated a concept of union of sovereign and independent countries, an idea that formed the basis for the association of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The idea of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a union is closely related to the founding idea behind our contemporary European Union – a remark that would not hold true for the eighteenth-century Polish-Saxon union, for a change. Secondly, religious toleration was an essential constituent of the Commonwealth. Dabrowski is fascinated by the circumstances in which a programme for religious tolerance and denominational freedoms could be assumed in the sixteenth century. There is no coincidence in the fact that the Warsaw Confederation act of 1573, which defined this innovative project, has been listed by the UNESCO as a World Heritage item. Although the tolerance principle tended to be broken in the subsequent centuries, no religion-promoted internal war ever broke out within Poland-Lithuania whatsoever. Thirdly, parliamentarianism attested to the country’s peculiar character. Between late fifteenth century and the Commonwealth’s very last days, there functioned a shared, Polish-Lithuanian, two-house Sejm. (Seimas and seima are the respective Lithuanian and Latvian presently used names of the lower house of parliament.) In the provincial areas, nobility-based self-government bodies called sejmiks, or dietines, operated. Fourthly, the 1791 ‘Constitution of the Third of May’ came as a constitutive quality of the Commonwealth – regrettably, in the final phase of the country’s existence. This first-ever
constitution in the European continent is obviously covered at an appropriate extent in the study; heralding a thorough political change for the country, the Constitution eventually provoked intervention from the disturbed Russia and a second partition of the Polish-Lithuanian territory. Fifthly, Dabrowski considers high and everyday culture a landmark: the achievements of Polish ‘Golden and Silver Ages’ are accurately and meticulously documented, as is the peculiar Sarmatian ideology and culture. The highlight figures of the era are evoked – notably, Nicolaus Copernicus, Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski, and Jan Kochanowski.

Dabrowski is fascinated by the phenomenon of Poland-Lithuania – a land of multiple ethnic and religious cultures; a country that was internally diverse and rich in assorted values and styles of life, open to foreigners and accepting political immigrants from the Netherlands, Bohemia, Russia, Sweden, Scotland, or Armenia, and offering shelter to thousands of Jews driven from the West of Europe. Jews found hospitality in the Commonwealth and were equipped with special rights and privileges, including a Jewish parliament.

The nineteenth century does not engage much of the author’s attention, for there was no Poland within Europe then: with the history of the nation remaining important, of primary importance for Dabrowski is the history of state institutions. The twentieth century is not a focal point, either; still, the reader is made aware of the major constituents of Poland’s history in the last two centuries. A primary characteristic of this time was, in the author’s opinion, the seeking by Poles of a way to an independent, self-sustaining state and their almost obsessive commitment to liberty. This is what made Poland rise again, anew, even if apparently hopelessly collapsed. The history of Polish national risings is richly documented: from the insurrection led by Thaddeus Kosciuszko (1794), the hero of Poland and the United States, through the 1944 Warsaw Uprising against the German occupiers, to the ‘non-revolutionary revolution’ of the Solidarity movement (1980–1).

Apparently, the prevalence of the early modern era in the proposed narrative leads, however, to a subverted proportion, thus somewhat weakening the structure of the book. The twentieth century ought perhaps to have been outlined more expressly, as that era is the closest to our day and its description would be of primary interest to many a reader. Yet, I can understand the author’s choice: she had to make choices so as to confine the history of Poland within a single volume.

Apart from the substance, the strong point of this book is its fluent style, full of charm and beauty. The author seamlessly leads the reader from one thread to another, through the complicated history of a state and nation that is distant from the American reader’s experience and concepts; actually, she takes the role of a guide in this respect.

Patrice Dabrowski’s account of the history of Poland testifies to her enormous cognitive effort, knowledge of the topic and reference literature.
The author is quite well versed in the most recent studies and makes relevant use of the source funds available. Being a synthetic depiction, the book contains an extremely, and astonishingly, small number of lapses, whether related to the facts or comments.

The author focuses on narrating, mainly, the politics, political system, and culture of Poland and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Considerations regarding economy, society, or civilisation-related phenomena are present in this book to a much less significant degree. This might have been due to the author’s concept of concentrating on items that ensure a disciplined and smooth narrative. Multiple diverse threads would certainly have made the reading a tougher experience. While the message is generally acceptable, one may regret the missing facts of social or economic history. The publisher has added a dozen illustrations – some, however, of poor quality and with not-quite-relevant comments.

All in all, this important and original account of the history of Poland is definitely a recommendable piece of reading.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Andrzej Chwalba