

5<sup>th</sup> November 2021

## Gunpowder

**“The three great elements of modern civilisation,  
Gunpowder, Printing, and the Protestant Religion.”**

*Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays (1838)*

Thomas Carlyle had moved his thinking on from that of Francis Bacon two centuries before. In 1620 Bacon had written in *Novum Organum*:

*It is well to observe the force and virtue and consequence of discoveries ... seen nowhere more conspicuously than in those three that were unknown to the ancients ... namely printing, gunpowder, and the mariner's needle ... These three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world.*

Two out of three in common? Perhaps we'll debate the relative importance of the Protestant Religion and the mariner's needle another time, and I'll leave the merits of printing for now. So that leaves us with gunpowder. One of the three great elements of civilisation? Discuss ...

Today, 5<sup>th</sup> November, the people of the UK have gunpowder on their minds. Known as “Guy Fawkes Day” or “Bonfire Night”, it commemorates “The Gunpowder Plot” of 1605, a failed assassination attempt on King James I. The plan was to blow up the House of Lords during the State Opening of Parliament. Guy Fawkes was in charge of the explosives, but the plot was discovered, the conspirators apprehended and executed, the King's life saved, and everyone lived happily ever after. Happily? No, I don't think so, not when gunpowder remained.

The first patent on “ways to prepare gunpowder” was received in 1863 by the Swedish chemist, Alfred Nobel. The first atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima in Japan at 8.15am on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1945. Gunpowder to the Atomic Bomb too big a leap? I don't think so. For while discoveries, from explosives to nuclear fission, can be put to good uses, when they are used for destructive purposes, the whole world suffers.

On 5<sup>th</sup> November, rather than lighting bonfires to remember a plot from four centuries ago, let's ponder the destructive forces we've released. Let's question the continued presence of Trident nuclear missiles on our own shores. Let “gunpowder” be a pointer to prayers of penitence as we seek forgiveness for the destruction we perpetuate.

### **A prayer for today**

*God of Peace and Justice, I'm sorry for being destructive. Please forgive me. Amen*