

The castles of Vaud

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THE CASTLES OF VAUD.

The very ancient "Pays de Vaud" as it has been known from time immemorial — now the State and Canton of Vaud and one of the twenty-two sovereign states of the Swiss Confederation — was once the cockpit of warring factions. A fertile, strategically important region, the Roman armies used it as an important turnplate for their routes from Italy into Gaul (via the Great St. Bernard Pass), from Gaul (Lyons) to the Rhineland along the eastern flank of the Jura and the Swiss Plateau. The Roman civilization went down before the invading hordes of Teutons and, after the Dark Ages, there arose, south of Lake Geneva, the powerful House of Savoy, safely ensconced in its ducal stronghold of Chambery, at the foot of the Mont Blanc. Westwards, out of the ruins of Charlemagne's Empire had arisen the great Dukedom of Burgundy, a thorn in the side of the French kings. From the XIIIth to the XVth century, history tells how these power and land-hungry princes fought amongst themselves to gain an ever firmer foothold in this Pays de Vaud. Then, in 1536, came the Reformation and, from the East, Berne the leader of the sovereign Swiss Cantons, sent its armies, officially to help the Protestant population of Vaud but, in reality, to break the power of prince and bishop and to operate a "peaceful occupation" of this pleasant land.

James E. Muirhead has called the Canton of Vaud "the chateau-land *par excellence*", adding that "visitors might do worse than arrange a point to point motor trip through this Canton."

The Castles of Vaud have been almost entirely forgotten by the organizers of international travel. Most of them do lie off the beaten track, it is true. They are not spectacular as are, for example, the Loire Castles or the ancient fortresses of Britain. But there are seventy-one of them in excellent repair; most are still inhabited or used as museums, municipal buildings, schools or — prisons. They belong, not to the main corridors of time but to the lanes and by-ways of history. Their charm is indisputable and their stones blend into a quiet and lovely countryside.

Chillon, near Montreux, has of course been publicized throughout the world. It is one of Europe's famed beauty spots and its walls, lapped by lake waters, has inspired romantic hearts ever since the days of Jean Jacques Rousseau who made Vevey, Montreux and Chillon the setting for his "Nouvelle Héloïse", Europe's tearful best-seller in 1768. Later came Byron, with his famed "Prisoner of Chillon" poem; Mary Shelley's extraordinary romance, "Frankenstein" was, by the way, inspired by the sight of Chillon in a thunderstorm.

The origin of the Castle is lost in the dawn of history; certainly, this unique site on a rocky, lake island crag was used as a defence position as soon as men learnt to pile one stone upon another. The Romans built a watch tower here, for the site lay on their route from the Great St. Bernard to Aventicum (capital city of Roman Helvetia) and into Gaul. It was, however, Peter, Duke of Savoy, known as the "Little Charlemagne" who made Chillon as we know it today, probably with the help of English military architects from the Court of the Plantagenets, with whom XIIIth century Savoy had close family ties.

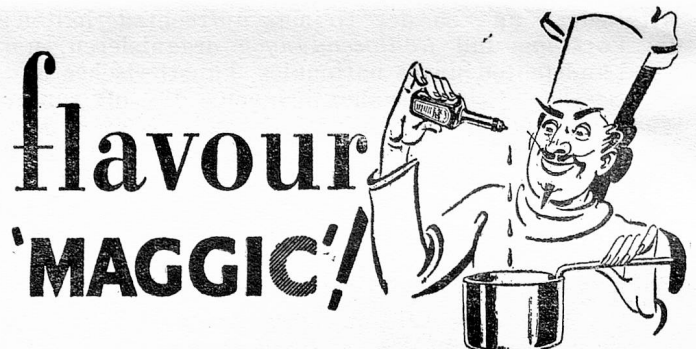
Peter of Savoy never took up residence at Chillon and the impressive pile was used both as a defence and

as a prison. Many legends are told of the gloomy "underground" cells, but the fact of the matter is that the Castle has no subterranean dungeons. Gloomy enough its memories are, however. In its courtyard, countless Jews and their supposed Christian accomplices were tried, tortured and put to death in 1348, on the accusation that they had poisoned local wells, causing the spread of the dread Black Death. Most famous of Chillon's prisoners was Francis Bonnavard, Prior of St. Victor Abbey in Geneva and hero of Byron's poem. Bonnavard was a champion of the Reformers and, on Ascension Day 1530, as he rode near Lausanne, he was kidnapped by soldiers of Savoy and incarcerated at Chillon. He was freed in 1536 by the Bernese when they swept in against Savoy and "peacefully" occupied Vaud. In the XVIIth century, Chillon was the scene of yet another inhuman massacre: from June 9th through September 26th, 1613, twenty-seven persons were tried for sorcery and put to death in the courtyard here.

Thereafter, the story of Chillon becomes more peaceful and, after serving many years as a XIXth century arsenal, this romantic building was proclaimed to be a National Monument and restored to its pristine glory.

Overlooking Montreux and its lovely bay rises the *Castle of Chatelard*, an impressive pile commanding an unforgettable view. Of the original XIVth century building there remains only the massive square keep, boldly outlined on its grassy, wooded hummock.

This castle was built in 1440 by Jean de Gingins,



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Baron of Chaterlard, in fulfilment of a treaty concluded by one of his ancestors, Francis, Baron of La Sarra, with the Duke of Savoy. Baron Jean was helped in his undertaking by the people of Montreux and, to reward their zeal, he and his fair wife, Margaret de la Sara, enfranchised the Parish in 1457. But the Castle suffered greatly during the guerilla warfare of the Burgundian wars. It was besieged by the militia of Fribourg and burnt to the ground, Baron Peter of Gingins was tragically killed at Vevey by the Bernese soldiery. After a stormy history, the castle passed into the hands of the de Blonay family who maintained their feudal rights until the late XVIIth century.

At nearby Blonay rises another picturesque castle, founded in 1175 by Guillaume and Pierre, sons of Vaucher, Baron of Blonay. Again we find that these ancient walls command a magnificent view, rising as they do from a grassy knoll above Vevey.

The Story of Blonay is unique, for it has remained in the same family (save for a brief interlude from 1750 to 1806) ever since its foundations were laid. The "Sires" de Blonay have lived here without interruption since their ancestors laid the first stones. With its central keep, turrets, high roofs and narrow windows, Blonay Castle is the scene of many legends, such as that of Isabella of Gruyères, whose Crusader husband, Aymon de Blonay, commanded her on his death-bed in the Holy Land, to marry their neighbour, Rudolph of Chatelard. Isabella carried out her lord's instructions and brought up Aymon's son Henri, and Rudolph's son Berthold. Many stories, too, are told of these young knights.

North of Lausanne, on the Moudon-Berne high-road, the *Castle of Lucens* rises like a story-book edifice against a rocky cliff. Impressive though it is, this Castle (now a school) has a less picturesque story. This XIIth century Castle once belonged to the Bishops of Lausanne, who delighted to use it as a summer residence. Originally intended as a defence against invaders from the north, it was enlarged and strongly fortified by Bishop Landri de Durnes (1159-1177), founder of Lausanne's Cathedral of Notre Dame. During the Burgundians wars, Lucens was burnt and pillaged by the Swiss militia, but it was restored. In 1532, Bishop Sebastian of Montfalcon received the Duke of Savoy here with great pomp and ceremony. It was the Castle's last great day for, four years later, the Bernese took over the building and installed their bailiffs there, to keep a stern eye on the neighbouring countryside.

North and east of Lausanne lies a very fine group of historic castles: Grandson, Yverdon, Champvent, Les Clées, La Sarraz, Vuflens and, along the lake shore, Morges, Rolle, Nyon and Coppet.

Grandson, one of the most remarkable castles in Vaud, lies at the southern end of Lake Neuchatel. Although no traces are left of the primitive stronghold, its existence can be traced back to about 1050 A.D. The XIth and XIIth century Counts of Grandson ruled over a small kingdom, extending from the Marches of Neuchatel almost to Lake Geneva. In the XIIIth century, the estate was divided among the sons of Ebal IV into the baronies of Grandson, Champvent, Belmont and La Sarraz.



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The House of Grandson, whose armorials bear a punning motto, "A petite cloche, grand son" (a small bell has a loud chime), has left its mark on the history of France and England. Otto I, Baron of Grandson was sent as a child (in about 1245) to the English court, there to serve as page and companion to Edward, Prince of Wales, the future Edward 1st. The two boys were inseparable and set off together on the Second Crusade. Legend has it that Otto saved Prince Edward's life at St. Jean d'Acre. However that may be, when he acceded to the throne, Edward kept Otto at his side, employing him on military and diplomatic missions, showering wealth and many estates on his favourite. Otto of Grandson was appointed Governor of the Channel Islands and Chief Justice of the North Wales Marches. He was an extremely wealthy land-owner by the time he set off on the Third Crusade which, for Otto, ended in disaster. At Edward's death, he returned to his native Grandson and met with a tragic death in Avignon in 1368.

A younger brother of Otto I, William, remained in England and was knighted in 1298, founding the baronetcy of Grandison. Otto III of Grandson fought in the Hundred Years War. Later he was accused of plotting against the life of the "Red Count" of Savoy and imprisoned at Chillon, whence he fled to England. Declared innocent by the King of France, the Dukes of Berry and Burgundy, Otto II returned home, only to be killed in a duel by his cousin Hugues (1397). This adventurous knight has a still greater claim to our interest for he was a poet and his work was highly praised and translated into English by Chaucer.

The Burgundian wars brought tragedy to Grandson Castle. Defended against the Swiss militia by Hugues de Chalon, the fortress capitulated on April 30th 1475. It was recaptured in the following February by Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, in person who vengefully caused the 400 men of the Swiss garrison to be hung from the apple trees in the Castle gardens. Four days later, the Swiss returned, recaptured the Castle and retaliated by hanging Charles' men from the self-same trees.

Throughout the XVIth to XIXth century, this historic building was only a dim shadow of itself. The Bernese established their bailiffs within its walls and it fell into disrepair. Finally, it was bought in 1875 by the Blonay family and wonderfully restored. At the moment of writing it is again for sale, priced at 200,000 Swiss francs.

About ten miles from Grandson lies the township of Yverdon, whose castle was built by Peter of Savoy, burnt and pillaged in 1476, restored and, later, seized by the Bernese. Its claim to interest lies essentially in the fact that it was here that, from 1804 to 1825, Heinrich Pestalozzi conducted his famous school and revolutionized educational methods in Europe.

Champvent, a few miles to the south of Yverdon, possesses one of Vaud's most majestic castles, a huge square XIIIth century pile with a round tower at each corner and walls of remarkable thickness. Here we have the story of Marguerite of Vufflens, an intriguing widow who, in 1369, married Louis of Neuchatel, Baron of Champvent, an old man whose three sons were dead. Marguerite managed her affairs excellently, for her doting old husband made a will in her favour, leaving her sole possessor of

Champvent. Marguerite's subsequent marriage and history reads rather like a tale of the wicked step-mothers of legend.

South again from Champvent lies the crag of *La Sarraz*, fortified by Adelbert of Grandson in the early XIth century and claimed by the Priory of Romainmôtier in 1049. A grandson of Adelbert, carried the romantic name of Falco de Serrata and a romantic young knight he must have been indeed. He fell madly in love with Adelada, daughter of Count Hilduin de Roncey and calmly kidnapped his true love's noble sire as the latter ambled through Vaud on his return from a trip to Rome. Falco carried off the Count to his castle and kept him there until he had obtained paternal consent to the wedding. One of the sons of Falco and Adelada was brought up in France and later became Bishop of Laon and protector of St. Norbert, founder of the Prémontré Order.

After the inevitable burning and pillaging of the Burgundian wars, the castle was restored in the XVth century by Barthelémy de la Sarraz. Today, the building houses a fine collection of furniture and is classed as a National Monument

Vufflens Castle is a stately structure, a XVth century residential stronghold, built entirely of brick and showing a marked Italian influence. An earlier castle stood on this site and was the scene of an amusing medieval incident. Jaquette de Vufflens received the castle as part of her dowry and, one day in 1393, while her husband Henri de Colombier was away, her brother-in-law, Guillaume, arrived, took possession of the estate and shut poor Jaquette and her son up in a barred and bolted room. Hearing the news, Louis de Bière, the bailiff of Savoy, rushed up to the Castle accompanied by a notary. Guillaume quietly informed him that Jaquette was being kindly treated, but that he intended to remain there until certain wrongs committed against him by her husband had been righted. Unfortunately, we have never been told how the story ended.

We have no time to linger over the castles of Orbe, Romainmôtier, Les Clées, Morges, Rolle and Nyon, guardians of routes and strategic positions from the earliest times. So let us finish our brief survey with mention of *Coppet*, the delightful XVIIth century, French-style "château" on the Geneva-Lausanne road.

The village and original XIIIth century castle of Coppet had already had a stirring history when it was

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bought, in 1784, by Jacques Necker, a Genevan banker who had risen to the position of Finance Minister to the ill-fated Louis XVI of France. With great foresight, Necker prepared this mansion as a refuge, and how right he was! A political refugee in 1790, he was glad to find haven here from the Revolution. His daughter, the famous Madame de Staël was exiled by her enemy, Buonaparte, and here at Coppet she entertained Europe's most famous writers and hot-heads, and her bosom friend the exquisite Madame Récamier. In the first decade of the XIXth century, Coppet became the cradle of the Romantic Age of literature, for it was here that Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël wrote "Adolphe", "Corinne", and "L'Allemagne". Coppet is still in the possession of Madame de Staël's descendants, the de Haussenville family, into which her daughter, Allbertine, married in 1816.

Jean Jacques Necker and his wife, Suzanne (née Curchod and an early love of Edward Gibbon the historian), Baron Auguste de Staël and his wife, are buried in the family mausoleum in the grounds of the chateau. As we have said, this brief survey of Vaud castles by no means exhausts the subject. Travellers find glimpses of them everywhere: among the vineyards, in picturesque villages and busy market towns. They are the reminders that Vaud stands at a historical crossroads and that the bustle of its modern life has its roots deep in a romantic past.

PETER AVON.

(Association des Intérêts de Lausanne.)



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