

Switzerland and the French Revolution : the free herdsman as a symbol

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The free herdsman as a symbol

Numerous Swiss played quite important roles in the French Revolution 200 years ago, giving their support to the most varied parties to the conflicts. But even more influential than the contributions made by individuals was the mystique, the mythos which communicated very significant impulses to the revolutionary process: the concept, the mental image of the free and open world of the Alps.

We all know – and it is a fact often called to mind in relevant contexts – that prominent Swiss were to be found among the leading protagonists in the arena of that revolution. Necker, the Finance Minister of Louis XVI, and his daughter, Madame de Staël, were for a long time right in the centre of events at the start of the revolution.

Individual Swiss men and women of flesh and blood were not as important as the presence of the myth of the free herdsman, of whom it was believed that he and his country were still the manifestation of freedom in its original form. Countless travellers and writers from many countries had made the happy herdsman and shepherd – nameless and without history – a well-known figure all over Europe. Thus André de Chénier, the famous poet of the times of the revolution, wrote after a visit to Switzerland as follows: *“Eh! qu’il eût mieux valu naître un de ces pasteurs*

*Ignorés dans le sein de leurs Alpes fertiles,
Que nos yeux ont connus fortunés et tranquilles!*

*Oh! que ne suis-je enfant de ce lac enchanté
Où trois pâtres héros ont à la liberté
Rendu tous leurs neveux et l’Helvétie entière!”*

William Tell and the Rütli became all over the world symbols of the free world of the Alps, in whose history one hoped to see a model for one’s own political future. Not only in France, but also in the other countries of Europe and America the concept of the free Swiss was a popular catchword. When the first opera to be composed in America had its premiere in New York, in 1794, its theme was the story of William Tell.

An idealised picture of Switzerland

After the overthrow of the monarchy in revolutionary France it was urgently necessary to seek new and republican models for the political system to be adopted. The patterns of perfection were thought to lie in republics of the ancient world, particularly those of classical Rome, in the Utopian dreams of thinkers in the “Age of Enlightenment” – and nearer home – in an idealised vision of Switzerland, her history and her inhabi-

tants. Many believed that in the isolated and secluded mountains and valleys of Switzerland something of the brilliance of the Golden Age had lingered on, and that the patterns of classical times had lived on here. Thus the Danish poet Jens Baggesen exclaimed after visiting the “Landsgemeinde” (open-air cantonal assembly) in Schwyz in



Valentin Sonnenschein (1749–1828): “Shepherd with Alphorn”, Terracotta 1810, Historical Museum, Berne. (Photo: S. Rebsamen)

the year 1790: “I thought I was in Greece.” William Tell – the archetype of the free dweller of the Alps – was celebrated, applauded and eulogised as the omnipresent hero of the fight for freedom, in the clubs of revolutionary France, the public offices of the administration and in the great festivities so often staged. His prowess was acclaimed in pictures, statues, poems and dramas. And in his play, written in the days of the revolution under the title “Guillaume Tell ou la Suisse libre”, Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian (1755–1794) caused Tell to speak the following lines, as the decisive words of the country’s political renaissance: *“Gardez vos mœurs; qu’elles deviennent même plus austères; sans vertu, point de liberté. Le républicain s’est placé, par ce nom, entre les anges et les hommes; qu’il soit donc meilleur, qu’il soit donc plus grand que tous les hommes dont il est entouré.”*

As the years passed, the contrasts between

the idealised picture of Switzerland that had been created, and the social and political reality of the old Confederation became ever more pronounced. But people did not want to be confused or as they thought, misled, by these contrasts. No – Switzerland and the Swiss had to live up to their image, so that the idealised vision could take effect. In those days of early tourism, few travellers were willing to see the other side of the coin. There were occasionally sarcastic comments on the discrepancy between vision and reality, but little attention was paid to such statements. So in the long run, the Swiss themselves came to see in the picture of the freedom-loving herdsman and shepherd a symbol of their national identity. And regardless of religious divisions and the conflicting interests of town and country, that symbol did in fact at last result in a focal point of national thinking, acceptable to everybody.

Thus one can say that it was not so much the citizens of Switzerland in those days who gave impulses to the French revolution, but rather the idealised figures of the Alpine scene and its heroic history which accompanied and inspired the revolution itself.

François de Capitani

A worthwhile exhibition

Revolution in Geneva

In the years between 1782 and 1798, the political scene in the city of Geneva was fuelled by intense passions that were ultimately to bring about the birth of a form of direct democracy which was both progressive and also unprecedented at that time. It was, nevertheless, not achieved without violent conflicts and much spilt blood.

On 7th July, the Musée d’Art et Histoire in Geneva opened an historic exhibition in the cellar vaults of the Maison Tavel in the old part of the city.

This is a copious collection of texts and objects dating from the time of the Geneva Revolution which has been both carefully researched and competently explained. Moreover, the visitor will become acquainted with this eventful period in the history of Geneva which came to an end in 1792 when the republic was annexed by France. (The exhibition is open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10.00 to 17.00, until 14th January, 1990.) *(From the NZZ)*