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Swiss in Africa

Of cotton traders and development assistants

The Swiss have been present in Africa for many decades. Some aspects of this are the subject of new scientific studies.

As early as 1904 the botanist, Hans Schinz, published a work with the title "Swiss Africa Travellers and Switzerland's part in the Opening up and Exploration of Africa". In 1991 Hans Werner Debrunner, a Swiss his-

René Lenzin

torian who used to live in Ghana, followed in the footsteps of Schinz with his book "The Swiss in Colonial Africa". Debrunner describes the careers of Swiss citizens who took part in the colonial penetration of the dark continent as missionaries and mercenaries, traders and scholars.

Alongside the colourful and interesting lives that it portrays, this book presents a valuable overview of all the literature and source material available, although it may be thought by some to

be a little lacking in depth. Debrunner is himself aware of this problem and emphasises that additional research is required for which he has so far not had sufficient time.

Self-chosen isolation

But a number of other studies about the Swiss in Africa which perhaps delve more deeply lack Debrunner's breadth. Unpublished diploma work on the Swiss communities in Algeria and Ghana were written at the University of Zurich, and last year Anita Müller published her study entitled "The Swiss in Alexandria". These works describe the Swiss communities in the various countries in question and take up in some degree the whole matter of the role and function of Swiss residents against the backdrop of the colonial period.

Using Alexandria as an example, Anita Müller shows that the Swiss tended to keep to themselves socially. There was a Swiss club, complete with a bowling alley, tennis courts, a community hall and even a Swiss school. These were the outer symbols of this self-chosen isolation. But there were ways in which the Swiss did think of themselves as an important component of the European minority – which was privileged in legal terms – separated as

much as possible from the local population in both the professional and the private spheres. The community in Alexandria was dominated by the great Swiss cotton manufacturing families and their patriarchal style of running things, which was accepted without resistance by virtually all Swiss residents. Conventional behaviour and sticking together in surroundings which were considered alien and even hostile were the main characteristics of the Swiss community.

This comprehensive and very readable book covers not only half a century of the Swiss presence in North Africa. But it also analyses the way in which Swiss entrepreneurs were able to build up a strong position in an Egyptian economy which was dominated by foreigners up to the Second World War – a situation which has of course entirely changed in the years of political transformation since those days.

Problems of development assistance

The varied operations of Swiss development assistance and cooperation in East Africa are the subject of Isolde Schaad's "Know-How at Kilimanjaro". This author extracts the essential from a number of selected examples of fine intention and educational striving by Swiss advisers – which as a rule foundered on the reality of Africa. This is something which remains heavily marked by the ideas of the former colonists and rarely corresponds to the ideal world which inhabits the minds of so many dogooders.

Isolde Schaad makes good use of irony and is perhaps occasionally shrill. She does not take a position of superiority, however, and is well aware of the complexity of the problem – having spent several years studying it on the spot and feeling totally immersed. This is a fascinating book which encourages the reader to reflect on the wider implications of cross-cultural contact. ■

Hans Werner Debrunner, **Schweizer im kolonialen Afrika**, (The Swiss in Colonial Africa), Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basle 1991, 245 pages, Sfr. 30.– (plus postage).

Anita Müller, **Schweizer in Alexandrien**, (The Swiss in Alexandria), Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 1992, 225 pages, about Sfr. 60.– (plus postage).

Isolde Schaad, **Knowhow am Kilimandscharo** (Know-How at Kilimanjaro), also available in French, Zurich 1984, Limmat Verlag, 227 pages, Sfr. 28.– (plus postage).

These books may be obtained from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16.

A Swiss builder and his African workmen. (Photo: Archives)

