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The quest for the real cow

It was a cow and bull that taught me about the birds and bees. They had been brought together for mating purposes. I was five years old and knew nothing about love, but I sensed that something momentous was happening.

Cows also taught me how to argue. In Denmark, where as a child I visited my cousin, they had only black and white cows. I was convinced that the only true cows – the brown and white ones – ate Swiss grass. You could tell that our cows were the genuine ones because they wore bells and adorned chocolate wrappers, postcards and leather belts. Danish cows were only featured on butter wrapping and milk cartons. And since I didn't like milk, that was all the proof I needed!

My Danish uncle, the proud owner of cows, horses and pigs, prophesied a life of chastity for me. "Unless you drink milk straight from the cow, you'll not find a farmer. And



Alice Baumann

"When it comes to the association of Switzerland with cows, the nation hovers between scepticism and enthusiasm"

the only real men are farmers," he used to threaten me. I believed him.

Now I am no longer so certain about what constitutes a real man or a genuine cow. In the sense that it embodies the myth of a strong, free country, the cow is the archetypal symbol of Switzerland. It supplies us with milk (at 78 cents a kilo for the farmer), meat and leather, and embodies the image of an untouched, idyllic Switzerland. We prefer to ignore the fact that many cows are fattened on fodder additives and that certain breeds have been eradicated. Our identification is too deep-seated.

Then the revival happened: Zurich invented the plastic cow, with coloured hides embellished by various artists. For an entire tourist season brightly-coloured cows adorned the city on the Limmat. They stood guard over watch shops, clothes boutiques and museums in place of stone lions, and even paraded along building facades. They even travelled abroad to conquer New York and Chicago.

In the mid-1960s the horned flesh-and-blood variety travelled from Zurich to the Indian town of Mattupatty. There, amidst Kerala's hills, they were paired under Swiss observation. As so often with cows, the goal was not to enjoy sex but to increase milk production. This rare liquid is an important ingredient in Indian chai and curry recipes. Although the cross-breeds look like nephews of the Swiss cow, experts can tell them apart at a glance: they are brown and white, but smaller than the Swiss high-yield cow. And instead of grazing in meadows to the accompaniment of bells, they wander soundlessly along the central strips of busy roads. In the evening they find their own way home, but not to the byre. Despite their holy status, Indian cows live behind the house.

Is the export of bull semen to India a noble act? It certainly serves a highly practical purpose. Yet the Swiss nation hovers between scepticism and enthusiasm when it comes our country's close association with the cow. As if afraid of slipping on a cowpat, we seem unable to decide which cow better represents Switzerland: the real or the artificial. It's all the same to me. As far as I am concerned, the main thing is that I don't have my Danish cousin's name: Lisi, a typical Swiss cow's name.

Alice Baumann



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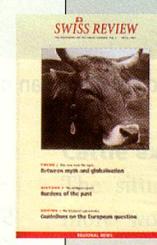
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Wary of the future? The cow is an integral part of the Swiss landscape. Yet its day-to-day use to promote the physical well-being of the population is not always unilaterally approved. Milk lakes and meat mountains repeatedly turn it into a football between opposing economic interests.

(Cover: JEAN-JACQUES RUCHTI)

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