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Family policy

A very good, relatively objective article. The conclusion is nevertheless questionable. One thing has always held true – a state's survival depends upon a woman! – and a man and children, an income and at least 20 years of care to ensure children survive to adulthood. It is extremely important in a healthy state that the protection of the biological family is promoted. "Working" (today "employed") mothers and fathers need, as they always have done, a safe place for their children if they work "outside the home". A society should therefore make it easier to meet family responsibilities. This is also in the interests of the state as this is the only way in which children develop into decent citizens. That is why we need good crèches which are inexpensive (a maximum of 10 Swiss francs a day), like those in Quebec. Good luck!

KATI LYON-VILLIGER,
OTTAWA, CANADA

Ten billion on air defence

Who are we defending ourselves against? Don't our members of parliament realise that the world is no longer that of the previous generation? Why not use this money to improve edu-

cation or to feed those who are hungry? We have to appreciate that we Swiss, some of the most privileged people of all, are part of the human family. It is a question of conscience.

MARCEL THEVOZ,
STAFFORD, VIRGINIA

Restricted Immigration Initiative

I was surprised to see that the Swiss Abroad were not in favour of restricting immigration. This is probably because they themselves are immigrants in their country of choice. As a third-generation Swiss Abroad, living in South Africa, I want to express in the strongest terms my opposition to unrestricted immigration. If the free movement of people had led to an overall upgrade in quality of life for all, then I would be unequivocally in favour. This is demonstrably not the case, in virtually all regions of the world. Before allowing foreigners into my house I would always vet them very carefully, and I would never make a permanent arrangement. Extending this to nations, it is terminal idiocy to allow unrestricted access.

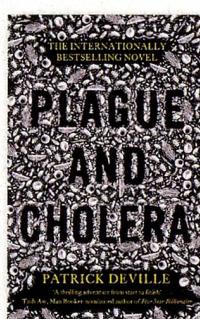
MICHAEL DES LIGNERIS,
PORT ELIZABETH, SOUTH AFRICA

Discoverer and universal genius

THE SAYING GOES THAT A PROPHET is without honour in his own country. This is certainly true in the case of Alexandre Yersin (1863-1943). However, Yersin, who was born in Morges in the canton of Vaud, spent most of his life in Paris and then in Southeast Asia. In his novel "Plague and Cholera", the French author Patrick Deville deservedly rekindles the memory of this universal spirit.

Yersin was a pioneer in various fields. The plague bacterium "Yersinia pestis" still bears his name today. He discovered it rather by chance in Hong Kong in 1894, in competition with other researchers, for France and the Louis Pasteur Institute. Yersin himself benefited little from this discovery. By the time his institute colleagues were receiving Nobel Prizes one after the other, Yersin had long since started pursuing other paths. He left the Parisian scene to find a new home in Vietnam, which belonged to France at the time. He found his personal paradise in the fishing village of Nha Trang, where he was able to give free rein to his wide-ranging interests. He created a small universe here in the jungle. The bacteriologist Yersin was also a land surveyor, geographer, meteorologist, farmer, engineer, inventor and architect. Impatient and quickly bored, he was always open to new things. He was a pioneering automotive enthusiast and was the first to drive a car through Hanoi. He made his fortune producing rubber and quinine.

Patrick Deville explores this wealth of inventiveness in his novel for which he was awarded the Prix Fémina in 2012. He gets close to his protagonist by employing a kind of temporal pincer movement with meticulous accuracy and extraordinary clarity. The last years of Yersin's life provide the backdrop. In 1940, just before the Nazis marched in, he visited Paris for one last time before turning his back on Europe for good. He had new plans in Nha Trang: he wanted to study Greek and Latin. In the form of a ghost from the future, Deville accompanies his protagonist through life reawakening memories of the key stages on his journey. What he brings to light is a gigantic micro-story from the perspective of someone who was interested in everything, except politics, and



who, despite his colonial pioneering spirit, was always respectful of the native inhabitants and showed no signs of inventor arrogance. "The agnostic Yersin is a darling of the gods," Deville notes.

"Plague and Cholera" is full of remarkable anecdotes about this mercurial spirit who has probably been forgotten because he cannot be categorised accurately as a scientist. This novel provides readers with an insight into the realms of both the pathogen and the discoverer. Alexandre Yersin is the travel guide, while Patrick Deville is his companion and discreet driver.

BEAT MAZENAUER

PATRICK DEVILLE: *Plague and Cholera*, Little Brown Book Group, London, 2014. Original French edition: *Peste et Choléra*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2012.



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