

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1943)
Heft: 1010

Artikel: Reflections on history
Autor: Burckhardt, Jakob
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686450>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

REFLECTIONS ON HISTORY. *

By JAKOB BURCKHARDT

(Reviewed by C. J. Bernheim.)

It is always a rare and stimulating experience to come across a book by a Swiss Author but particularly so at the present time when communications with Switzerland are so difficult.

Although Burckhardt has for many years been highly esteemed as a great historian and eminent scholar, not only in Switzerland but also in the neighbouring countries, very little has been heard of him so far in this country. This book will certainly remove this apparent neglect and no doubt make him better known and appreciated as he definitely deserves to be.

Jakob Burckhardt was born at Basle in 1818 and died there in 1897. His life followed the course taken by nearly all of Switzerland's greatest men. For a time they breathe with a kind of intoxication the larger air of France or England or Germany or Italy, and eventually return home and settle down to their true vocation which in Burckhardt's case was to be the teaching of History. He held the chairs of History and History of Art at the University of Basle and soon acquired a high reputation as a teacher. We are told that he was given a chance of succeeding Ranke at Berlin which he, however, turned down. It is probably on this occasion that he wrote (in 1863): "I think as little as possible of the dangers which threaten our lives on all hands. I do not believe that a man grows wiser or better by staring into chaos. The five boards of my professorial platform have this to be said for them — that I need preach neither Greater Germany nor Little Germany, but can, in every way, say what 'I' think." After that there is surely no need for further proof of his outstanding integrity and spiritual independence. He was entirely devoted to his University though it no longer held the eminent position which it had done in the past and no call to a wider sphere of action could move him. In 1876 he wrote: "I have long since simplified my standpoint by regarding every question from the angle of the University of Basle, and merely asking: 'Will it serve that University or not?' If I have not been guilty, nor shared the guilt, of anything which might be prejudicial to its interests, I shall look back on my career 'in globo' with satisfaction." And again: "In my dubious estimate of earthly bliss I find a great lacuna, one exception, and that is this — I regard the existence of the University of Basle not only as desirable in the mundane sense, but as a metaphysical necessity."

Now to come to the book itself. It is in many respects an unusual one, and is really a translation (a very good translation too) of "Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen" which first appeared in the German original in 1906. It consists of drafts and notes for lectures held, some at the University, some at the Museum at Basle between 1868 and 1885. These notes were not prepared for publication by Burckhardt himself who, in fact, never intended them for publication. Indeed he did not wish to have his lectures published and it was only when he was dying that permission to publish was wrung from him. They were prepared by his nephew, Jakob Oeri, who spent years arranging and editing the notes. Although Burckhardt actually did himself publish four works: "The age of Constantine

the Great" (1852), "The Cicerone" (1855), "The Renaissance in Italy" (1860) and "The History of the Renaissance" (1867), he had ceased to publish at the time the lectures were given. He had then come to the firmly held conclusion that the spoken word was his true medium. Carl Spitteler gave the following description of Burckhardt as a lecturer: "Delivery — masterly. Bearing — diffident, but without affectation because wholly absorbed in the gravity of his theme. Came in hurriedly, took up his stand in front of the desk — never behind it, nor seated — without a scrap of paper, said 'Gentlemen' and began Never sought for words, never hesitated, never corrected himself. Simple and masterly. The whole lecture one religious exercise, a prayer to history." It is therefore to Oeri that we are indebted for this book and the debt is great because here 'History' is being exposed in an altogether unique and astounding fashion. Burckhardt himself, in his 'Introductory' lecture, warns his student that "it is not our purpose to give directions for the study of history in the scholar's sense, but merely hints for the study of the historical aspect of the various domains of the intellectual world." We find, however, that the mere 'hints' expand into brilliant excursions, not into History as it is generally understood, but into philosophy, psychology, theology, science and arts. In other words it is History on a far higher plane than the title of the book would lead us to expect. Burckhardt's idea of History embraces "the whole visible and spiritual world and goes far beyond the bounds of any former notion of 'History'". Besides being a great historian, Burckhardt is eminently the philosopher surveying human history. In reading the present volume, it is at times difficult to distinguish between the historian and the philosopher: both are equally brilliant. Burckhardt can also lay claim to what can truly be called prophetic vision. Indeed, in a letter written in 1870 (at the time of the Franco-Prussian war) he wrote: "The most ominous thing is not the present war, but the era of wars upon which we have entered, and that is what the new spirit will have to adapt itself to. How much, how very much, that men of culture have loved will they have to cast overboard as a spiritual 'luxury'! Only think how much existing literature will be destroyed To me, as a teacher of history, a very peculiar phenomenon has become manifest, namely the sudden devaluation of all mere 'events' of the past. From now on, my lectures will stress the history of ideas, retaining only an indispensable scaffolding of events." In the present volume, he does not attempt to predict the future course of history: rather does he dissect past events with such remarkable insight and wisdom as to make their meaning and consequences crystal clear for all to draw their own conclusion. It is aptly stated that with him as guide, we can understand and to a certain extent, foretell the shape of things to come.

There could be no more appropriate time for the publication of Burckhardt's lectures than now.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

We hope to go to press again on April 30th and wish to thank the following for their very acceptable contribution towards our heavy cost of production: Miss C. Rougemont, J. H. Speich, J. J. Eberli, E. Steiner, Miss R. Imhof, S. E. Bally, J. A. Seiffert, Miss Alpstät, Bulle Products.

* Published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 220pp. Demy 8vo, bound at 12/6.