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# NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE.

Lecture by Professor G. R. de Beer, F.R.S.

The announcement, that Professor G. R. de Beer, F.R.S., would address the members on "Development of Appreciation of the Alps" brought about 75 members and friends to Conway Hall, on Tuesday, November 19th, 1946.

Those who braved the foul weather (rain and fog) were richly compensated for their exertions. The lecturer is not only an eminent professor at University College, London, but a great scholar and scientist, and above all an ardent lover of our country. He has written several books on Switzerland, the latest one "Intellectual Escape to Switzerland" (Penguin No. 490), was brilliantly reviewed in the June issue of the "Swiss Observer" by our collaborator J.J.F.S.

It is gratifying to see, that, in spite of adverse weather conditions, so many of our compatriots testified by their presence, their appreciation and esteem for Professor de Beer.

Mr. A. F. Suter, President of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, opened the meeting by extending a hearty welcome to the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Paul Ruegger, and Dr. A. Escher, Counsellor of Legation and to the lecturer of the evening Professor G. R. de Beer. He expressed his appreciation to the latter for his courtesy in addressing the members on a subject which is especially dear to all Swiss.

Space unfortunately does not allow us to publish this excellent *exposé in extenso*, for the benefit of the readers of the "Swiss Observer" although we should have liked to do so.

Professor de Beer, in opening his lecture, said that he is one of those who believes that to enjoy things to the full, the enjoyment should be shared, for this reason he prefers it when the authors of the books he reads are well disposed towards the Alps. "But when a man dislikes them and can express his dislike in really moving terms," he continued, "I find it hard to withhold my respect for his views, and sometimes even my admiration."

That the admiration for our glorious Alps was not always shared by eminent writers throughout the ages, was proved by the speaker, who read out (in excellent French and German) various excerpts of writers who at the time dominated the intellectual life.

He gave a free translation of a poem, called "Regrets" by the great French poet, Joachim du Bellay, who, in 1557, returned from Rome, and crossed the Grisons and Switzerland. It ran like this:

"He who has violated the laws of friendship,  
Encompassing the death and harm of his friend;  
He who has ruined his brother in lawsuits,  
Or embezzled the state of a ward;  
He who has betrayed his country and his king,  
He who like Oedipus has killed his father,

He who like Orestes has caused his mother's death,  
He who has renounced his baptism and faith;  
It is not necessary that for the expiation  
Of such appalling abominable crimes  
He should be made to eat his heart out,  
Night and Day, barefooted, for six or seven years:  
Let him just pass through the Grisons,  
That is if he wants a rebate of God's grace."

Another French poet, Olivier de Magny, contemporary and friend of du Bellay, who also gave his opinion of the Grisons, which he crossed in 1556, wrote in one of his sonnets "Soupirs":

"I would rather spend ten nights on hard earth,  
Remain booted ten days in winter  
Following the king's court, muddy night and day,  
Ill-fed, penniless and badly mounted;  
I would rather see myself in the dark dungeon  
Of some Spanish Dago, chained fifteen days,  
In danger each day of such maltreatment  
As being fed on bread and water;  
I would rather endure a heavy storm at sea,  
Thirty days on end in danger of shipwreck  
Provided that this danger did not materialise,  
Than cross the Grisons, Aprica and Bernina

passes,

The bridge of Camogasc and the pont Arrasine,  
With their infamous inhabitants and stoves."

Professor de Beer said that we should be wrong, however, in looking down on du Bellay's time and on his contemporaries, as an age of pure alpine philistinism, for two reasons. One of these is that even in our own day, we have people who do not appreciate the beauties of the Alps, and cannot express themselves as well as du Bellay.

As an example he read out part of a letter written in 1910 by Sir Walter Raleigh, the Oxford Professor of English Literature, who said:

"We have been in Switzerland of all places!  
It was very ugly and very healthy. We liked it. The heavenly thing about Switzerland is the air and the exhilaration. If it were relaxing and melancholy in climate everybody would see how ugly it is."

"The other reason is," the lecturer said, "that in spite of the fact that few appreciated the Alps before Haller and Rousseau in the mid-eighteenth century, the appreciation of those few was as enthusiastic as that of the Alp-lover of to-day."

To emphasize this, the following extracts were given: Erasmus, the Sage of Rotterdam after he had been on a visit to Constance in 1522, wrote:

"The situation of the place itself is pleasing. Hard by is the wonderfully beautiful lake of Constance, stretching many miles in either direction and always lovely. The wooded mountains showing themselves everywhere, some afar, others near by, add charm to the scene. For there the Rhine, as though wearied with his journey through the rough and rugged Alps, refreshes himself as it were in a pleasant inn, and, slipping softly through the middle of the lake, recovers at Constance his channel and his name together, for the lake prefers to owe its name to the city."

The same feeling of benevolence towards the Alps, although more rustically expressed, emerges from Johannes Müller Rhellicanus's "Stockhorniad" of 1536, of which the following are a few lines:

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"We reached the summit of the Stockhorn. From there, to the east, marshes, lakes, the impetuous course of the Simme and of the Aare, towns, plains and green pastures strike the eye; while on the other side where Phoebus bathes his horses in the waters of the west, we see innumerable mountains, like the waves of a huge sea. Our eyes are satiated, but our stomachs cry out..."

In 1157 Benedikt Marti climbed the Niesen and wrote:

"I noticed the following inscription in Greek, carved by a scholar who had succumbed to the charm of mountains: 'Love of mountains is best.' I think that it would be difficult to find a mountain as charming as this one, not only on account of the view which extends in all directions, but also because of the diversified flora which is so abundant."

Two years later, in 1559 Johann Fabricius climbed the Calanda and wrote to Conrad Gessner:

"I wish, my dear Gessner, that you had been with us for an hour or two; we all of us said the same. No Mountain is richer in plants than this."

In 1564 Richard Smith returning from Rome with Sir Edward Unton crossed the St. Gothard and speaks of:

"A brydge which is called ponte inferno, it standeth in a straite betwene the Mountaines the beginninng of the ryver of rehin cometh from mount godard and a this brydge hath suche a fale amonge the huge stones that it mervylous."

The same journey was made in 1599 by a woman, Isabel Clara Eugenia, the Grand Infanta. She is still alive to the dangers of crossing the Devil's bridge but adds:

"I should not like to have missed seeing this country, for at the time when we saw it I doubt if there can be a greater thing in the world, nor any more worthy to be seen, though not to live in because of its asperity."

The same is true of the XVII century. In 1604 a Spanish soldier and poet, Cristobal de Virues wrote: (on crossing the Gothard)

"We ascended the main valley behind Bellinzona along the left bank of the famous river Ticino, which flows tempestuously through the valley while the mountains on each side feed it with their springs. A divine spectacle!"

The lecturer said that in considering the reactions of men to mountains, there is one factor to which he does not think enough attention has been given. Insufficient allowance has been made for change of mood.

One and the same man may dislike the Alps at one moment, fall for them at the next, and even return to his first opinion. He mentioned, that there is one other trait of human nature which must be taken into account when appraising the opinions of people; the principle, that what you want other people to do is nice and good for them. Nobody was less capable of appreciating the Alps than Mme. de Staël. Returning from Chamonix in 1807, breathless and indignant, she asked what crime she had committed, that she had been taken to that horrible place. And in the following year at Interlaken, she supposed that the many visitors she found there were merely seeking sufficient boredom in the mountains to return to society with greater pleasure.

"And yet," Professor de Beer said, "when this woman wanted Mr. Loch of Norbury to come to Switzerland, she had the effrontery to write to him in 1794 and say, *nothing could be more beautiful than winter in Switzerland; it was true that society was not interesting but nature took its place.* This was not gilding the lily, it was gilding what to her was a pill which she wanted someone else to swallow."

Other testimonials by eminent writers such as: Moulinié, Balzac, Hookham, Studer, Ellerton, Wagner, A. v. Haller, etc., were cited, which were most enthusiastic.

In concluding this most enjoyable address, Professor de Beer, said, that, so many distinguished thinkers should independently have reached the same conclusion is evidence that appreciation of the human associations of places can play a large part in enjoyment, and is therefore of importance from the point of view of modern tourism. He suggested, that the encouragement of what may be called the humanist aspect of modern tourism deserves a place among its "meta-economic" functions.

Professor de Beer received a hearty ovation on resuming his seat.

Monsieur P. Ruegger, the Swiss Minister, expressed, on behalf of the audience, his admiration to the lecturer for his excellent *exposé*, and voiced the wish that it should be published *in extenso*.

Before the closure of the Meeting, Mr. C. Kunzle, from Birmingham, in his usual enthusiastic manner, explained his scheme so dear to him, to send sick and suffering English people to Switzerland (Davos) to regain their health and strength. In vivid terms he remunerated his efforts in this direction, and it is hoped that the untiring endeavours of this great humanitarian will meet with the success they deserve.

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