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SWISS LITERATURE, ITS CHARACTER AND ASSOCIATIONS.

Talk given by Mr. Marfurt on
Tuesday, February 17th, 1948.

Swiss literature falls into four parts which are determined by the different language groups. The character of these four literatures — a character common to them all — is formed by the position of Switzerland in Europe, not only geographically but philosophically and economically. Without doubt the mountains influence the character of the literature very much and one cannot do better than to cite Wordsworth's great sonnet:

"Two Voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the Mountains; each a mighty Voice:"

In order to get acquainted with the character of Swiss literature one must consider the individual parts:—

Swiss-German Literature.

There are two groups; that of the classics represented by Gottfried Keller, Konrad Ferdinand Meyer, Jeremias Gotthelf and Karl Spitteler and that of the dialect literature which is very important and becoming of increasing importance, ably represented by such men as Huggenberg (who has also written good works in German) and Lienert who writes in the exclusive dialect of Schwyz, this limiting the number of his readers — a difficulty unfortunately encountered by all dialect writers. Thus Keller and Meyer are more popular because they are more easily read than the dialect writers, although it is interesting to note that Keller's language has a very individual nature which is probably noticed by those who read him who are not Swiss.

Coming to a recent poet, we have Carl Spitteler (1846-1926). He acquired universal recognition and was the only Swiss literary man who was awarded the Nobel prize about 1925. One must not leave him without remarking upon his stay in Russia where he studied Russian culture and the spirit of the people. He is unique in Swiss literary history through this experience of life in Russia.

In Gotthelf we have the writing parson. His flock in Lützelflüh were simple country folk, working against the forces of nature and the corresponding hardening of their characters made it difficult for Gotthelf to convince and impress them verbally so he took to writing his sermons, which have since become so famous.

French-Swiss Literature.

The literature of the French part of Switzerland is more related to French culture than is the German-Swiss to German culture, but it also has a particular character and is typically French-Swiss.

Its authors are individualists, the most striking example of course being Rousseau, although not many French consider him as a Swiss. Then there is Ramuz, the great writer who did not use the dialect of the canton of Vaud but made up his own language; finding French too delicate, too fine for his works, he formed his own expressions. Ramuz, the great lover of the country, as is shown so well in his "Chant du Rhône" in which the mountains and rivers are described so vividly, with emphasis not on the tourist attraction of the mountains but on their cruelty.

One of the great contemporary writers is Zermatten who has produced a great volume of work. His novels depict the country too but it is different from that of Ramuz; Zermatten's scenery is dominated by the canton of the Valais. In contrast to the Protestant trend in French-Switzerland, Zermatten is Catholic. His Catholicism forming the background of his works is reflected in them and therefore limits the number of his readers.

De Reynold, another contemporary is the typical aristocrat of French-Switzerland to-day.

Italian-Swiss Literature.

Probably this literature is far more Italian than the French and German-Swiss are French and German. This is partly due to the Tessin's geographical position — she is so near to Italy and all her valleys converge towards the South.

The smallness of the population affects the demand for literary works so that Ticinese writers have difficulty in getting their works printed in the Tessin and therefore have to turn to Italy for help in this direction. Francesco Chiesa, who is still alive, has had his works printed in Italy. He is a great writer of the life and people of the Tessin. Another is Zoppi, who through his book, *Presento il mio Ticino*, is the spokesman of Italian Switzerland in the German-speaking part, for he lives at Thalwil.

Literature of the Romansch part of Switzerland.

The Romansch writers have one salient difficulty — lack of a common dialect — there is no one Romansch language, therefore they have to write in German. However, the dialects fall into two groups, those spoken in the Engadine and those spoken in the Oberland; both have their literatures. Finally if one compares the results of the Romansch writers with the number of inhabitants one must admit that they are very productive.

Associations of Swiss Literature.

Perhaps one should first mention Mme de Staël, who, at her famous château in Coppet, presided over the cultural and international gatherings of the most leading literary men, philosophers, and politicians. It is interesting to note that Byron attended some of the Coppet meetings.

Basel in her unique position in Switzerland in the fourteenth century was one of the most famous centres for printing and it was Basel that had the first university in Switzerland.

Capolago at the end of the Lake of Lugano is also important centre for printing because it is there that Italians went who could not have their works printed in Italy through political upheavals.

Lastly, we have Rousseau, the greatest of all, Rousseau whose character and culture played such an important part in Europe and when thinking of the man who was the forerunner of the French Revolution and the great advocate of the "Retour à la Nature," one must not forget that he was too Jean-Jacques Rousseau, citizen of Geneva.

Swiss literature has a two-fold value; it helps not only the Swiss themselves but also — and perhaps even more important — the people of other nations to recognise the Swiss character.

M.U.