

Cultural crossroads

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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVIER REVERDIN.

Switzerland is an ancient land of liberty. Since the Middle Ages, her Cantons have been Republics, which live democratically. The sole period in her history when she abandoned this tradition was at the end of the 17th and 18th centuries. At that time, the Patriciat had established an oligarchic régime in the principal cities; but, even during this period, intellectual and spiritual life was able to develop in an atmosphere of great freedom.

This freedom served to determine one of the fundamental and constant aspects of what may be called Swiss civilisation. A land of liberty, Switzerland was in truth a country of refuge. Foreign thinkers, scholars and writers, who were bullied or persecuted in their own countries, sought for asylum in Switzerland, settled down here and continued to devote themselves to their work.

In this way, during the course of the centuries, Basle, Zurich, Berne, Lausanne and Geneva, as well as other towns of lesser importance, received illustrious guests who had come from the neighbouring countries and who did much to enrich the intellectual life of their hostess-land. This began already in the 16th century and has gone on right up to the present time. One has only to recall to mind the numerous German Liberals who found refuge in Switzerland after the failure of the 1848 Revolution, the Italian patriots who also arrived in large numbers, with Mazzini at their head, at the same time, the French Communards of 1870, the Russian intellectuals who came at the beginning of this century and, during the last war, all those who, fleeing from the Hitlerite tyranny or the Occupation, were to find a haven in Switzerland, where they could express their ideas freely.

To-day, we are going to examine a very ancient document, which will give us some information in regard to this aspect of Swiss civilisation. This is the first complete edition of the works of Plato. It was published in Geneva in 1578. I have got it, lying before me. It consists of three volumes, bound together and thus forming an enormous in-folio book, the weight of which exceeds eight kilos.

I would like to draw your attention, in passing, to the fact that this edition is very famous. At the present time, still, all reference made to Plato, all the quotations taken from him, are indicated in accordance with the pages of this enormous in-folio the numbering of which has always been carried over to the subsequent editions.

Let us open this volume. Under the title, we find the name of the printer, the most famous of that time: Henri Estienne. His father Robert Estienne, sought for refuge in Geneva, in 1551, in order to be able to print freely. Converted to Calvinism, he was no longer able to do so in Paris, where he had had his presses until then. Henri followed his father to Geneva, and continued to print there during the whole of the second half of the 16th century. He is considered to be, not only the most remarkable of the printers of that period, but, also, one of the last great humanists, of the Renaissance.

Now, let us turn over the leaves of this big book. We find three dedicatory epistles, one for each volume. They are addressed to three Protestant sovereigns: Queen Elizabeth of England, King James

the Vith of Scotland and . . . the Republic of Berne! Geneva, a reformed city, the microscopic territory of which was surrounded by those of two Catholic Powers, namely France and Savoy, looked upon the British sovereigns and Berne as being its natural protectors, and this proved to be, effective in various ways and on several occasions.

We will now turn over some pages and examine the prefatory poems, in Greek and in Latin, with which it was the customs in the 16th century, to introduce important books. The first of these is signed François Portus. He came from Crete, lived for some time in Venice, then became secretary to Renée of France, at Ferrari, was converted to Calvinism, and finally settled in Geneva, where for many long years he taught Greek at the Academy which Calvin had just founded. The second, is signed Henri Estienne about whom, we already know. The author of the third poem, Thomas Bodley, is a famous Englishman, who studied in Geneva. It was he who founded the famous Bodley Head Library at Oxford, which still exists and which was the first big public library in Europe. We also find among the authors of the prefatory poems, the names of Théodore de Bèze, the famous Reformer who was Calvin's successor in Geneva, Simond Goulard, a Frenchman who had also settled in Geneva, where he was destined, after Théodore de Bèze to carry on with Calvin's work, Toussaint Ducret, a doctor from Burgundy, who had found refuge in Geneva after the massacre of Saint Bartholomy and a great many other remarkable men most of them foreigners, whose names it would take me too long to enumerate. Let it suffice for me to mention that among them is to be found a German.

All these people pay homage in verse to the great

undertaking carried out by Henri Estienne and Jean de Serres, author of the Latin translations which are printed opposite to the Greek text. I speak of a "great undertaking" because the Genevese edition of Plato was a significant milestone on the road of culture, and it may be considered as being the mother of hundreds of editions, complete or partial, which have since followed. If it fell to Geneva to have the honour of giving birth to it, and, if so many eminent men of various nationalities have welcomed this event with their prefatory poems, and if the work was dedicated to an English and a Scotch sovereign, it is because, already at that time, Switzerland was a land of refuge and of liberty, a land to which the various civilisations of Europe came, as a confluent stream, where they found a warm welcome and were able to come together.

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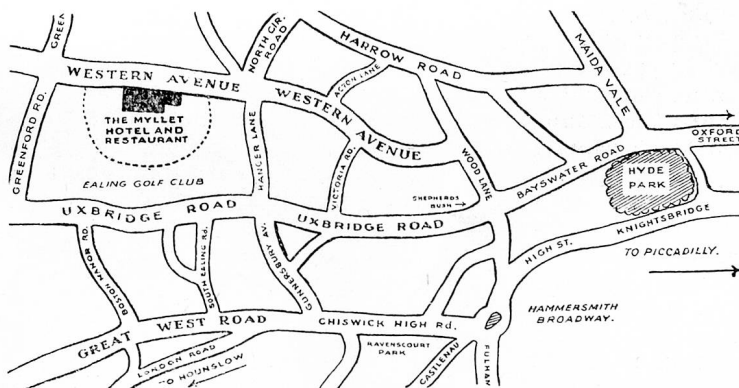
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