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SWITZERLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE

By M. L. HERKING

Our literature of the 19th century in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, was as important as was that of the 18th century in French-speaking Switzerland, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Madame de Staël. Its renown was such that Germany took the greatest interest in our writers, whose mother-tongue was German, and looked upon them as belonging to her. Do not let us, however, be too affected by this, for had not our writers gone beyond the stage of mediocrity, our neighbours would have ignored them.

Let us begin with the Bernese, *Jeremias Gotthelf*, who was born in the last years of the 18th century—in 1797—and whose entire work was composed during the first half of the 19th century, his death occurring in 1854. Gotthelf perceived better than anyone else what it was that characterised our peasants—or rather, as we should say, farmers—although he himself was a town-dweller, a pastor and the son of a pastor. In view of the fact, however, that his various parishes were nearly all to be found in the countryside, it is not surprising that he should have chosen it as the subject for his novels. Moreover, Gotthelf saw in the rural life, which had so much respect for tradition, the most authentic values to be found in our Helvetic patrimony. For him, the work on a farm, which demands endurance, regularity and, above all, an immense faith in Providence and great love for the land, was something sacred. The great drama consists in the fact that, little by little, these traditions of work and of faith are disappearing and this loss will also be one for our Western civilisation. He knew very well that everything was not perfect in the life of the countryside, that the most diverse characters were to be met there, and that passions could be as violent as anywhere else, and thus, if Gotthelf wrote pages of the purest lyricism, there are others to be found in his books which border on the epic or the drama. The variety of types that he offers us—for he created real types of men and women—is inexhaustible, and these types are not abstractions, but truly living beings, seen in their humble work of every day, on the farm, in the stables, in the cowshed and the chicken run, who express themselves simply in the pungent language which is theirs. Gotthelf knew how to conjure up an atmosphere, and the countryside which serves as a frame for the characters in his books also participates in their life. Gotthelf is essentially a popular author—in the sense that he writes of the common people—but this did not prevent him from having a large circle of readers abroad, especially in Germany. The centenary of his death was celebrated six years ago, and it may be said that the entire Swiss population paid him a homage that was very touching.

Gottfried Keller, of Zurich (1819-1890), was of a very different stamp. Attracted by German culture, he lived for seven years in Berlin, but always continued to maintain close contacts with his own country, to which he returned in order to write his works, which were to be a faithful portrait of his native land. His "Legends", his "Banner of the Seven Brave Men" and his "The Bailiff of

Greifensee", which are not devoid of humour, and especially his novel, "Martin Salander", contain an idealised, almost transfigured, picture of his homeland. He also knows how to evoke images; he sees what he describes to us with the eyes of a painter, and his polished, colourful language makes him of kin with the great German writers.

And here is still another author from Zurich, *Conrad Ferdinand Meyer* (1825-1894), a contemporary of Keller, but very different from him. Just as Keller is attracted by the North, Meyer is drawn to the South, and loves everything Latin. He paid long visits to Italy on several occasions, and it was there that beauty of form was revealed to him. Meyer was an artist. He aimed at perfection, and his works, whether it be his big historical novel, "Jürg Jenatsch", or his novelettes, which were also practically all historical reminiscences of the Antiquity of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, or of the Reformation, or his "Ballades" in verse, all of them, by their composition or their style, correspond to this love he had for clarity and purity of form.

This contact with the past and with countries belonging to the ancient culture was to give birth to another great writer, a historian, this time *Jacob Burckhardt*, of Basle (1818-1898). The son of well-to-do family, he travelled a great deal, right from his childhood, being especially attracted by cathedrals. This taste of his was to lead him to Italy, and he, also, struck by the artistic riches of this country, became a historian. His masterly book, "Civilisation at the Time of the Renaissance", his "Cicerone", and his "The Century of Constantine the Great", brought him European celebrity. Historians, scholars and artists still have recourse to his works; he possesses a broad outlook and he is an inexhaustible mine of information. He foresaw the events through which we are living to-day. He feared the formation of tentacular States which establish themselves by means of force and which restrict the liberty of the individual, and he cried out: "The small State exists in order that there should be a place in the world, where the greatest number of its inhabitants can be citizens in the fullest meaning of that term."

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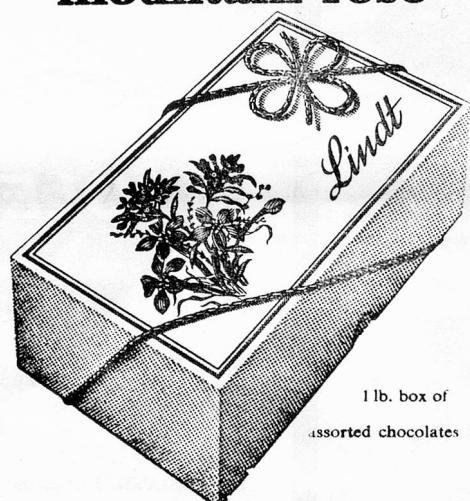
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