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SWISS IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by

Béat de Fsicher

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In a book intended to commemorate the merits of a great English connoisseur of the work of Voltaire, a Swiss friend and admirer might be tempted to take as the starting point of his contribution the great philosopher, the 'Suitsman V.'¹ and his visit to England of 1726-28. No doubt Monsieur de Voltaire came across few Genevans or Swiss whilst over here; but what sort of Helvetic society might he and his contemporaries have found if they had felt inclined to look for it?

Thus it is the Genevan² and Swiss society in eighteenth-century England which will provide the subject of this essay. The temptation to write it was all the stronger because that period was also the golden age of the Swiss colony in the British Isles.

Introduction

In the eighteenth century many Genevans and Swiss played a particular notable part in an astonishing number of sectors of English life. True, there already existed before this time close, strong and even vital links between England and some of our republics, our cities and our eminent men. Until then, however, relations had been almost exclusively confined to questions of religion — aspects of the organisation of the churches — and the political and military solidarity to be established among the Protestant powers; and the main factor was the English interests in the homes of the new faith, especially Zurich and Geneva.

This changed during the course of the eighteenth century. Protestant England and her Protestant sovereigns, of course, continued to constitute a strong attraction for Geneva and the Protestant Cantons, and a large number of their citizens came here, and were welcomed, for religious reasons. But the dialogue broadened considerably from this century onwards, and was to be long sustained with great intensity on both sides.

Several circumstances brought about this change. First of all, the 'Back to Nature' movement, inspired primarily by the publication of 'The Seasons' (1730) by the Scot James Thomson (1700-48), turned English attention to the Helvetic people and their mountains, whose beauty was to be revealed in Albert de Haller's *The Alps* (1729) and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). This enthusiasm soon manifested itself in numerous poetic works. In 'Liberty' (1731) Thomson himself celebrated the virtues of the simple cowherds of our valleys. Then, in his letters of 1739, Thomas Gray described the blissfulness of the City of Geneva and the beauty of her lake. In his 'Helvetiad' (1756) George Keate sang of our fights for freedom; he then wrote a history of the City of Calvin (1761), which he dedicated to the 'Genevan' Voltaire, and in which he held up that community as an ideal for republics; finally, in *The Alps* (1763), he described the attractions of our mountains. Oliver Goldsmith dedicated his book *The Traveller* (1764) to us, as did William Wordsworth his *Descriptive Sketches* (1793).

This was also the period when numerous Englishmen began to travel more widely in Switzerland and to settle there. The 'Grand Tour' almost inevitably brought to our

country the sons of wealthy families, and William Coxe speaks kindly of it in his *Travels in Switzerland* (1779). Edward Gibbon (1737-94), following the example of many others of his countrymen, resided in Lausanne for a total of sixteen years between 1753 and 1793, and even contemplated marrying the handsome Suzanne Curchod, the future Madame Necker, mother of Madame de Staël.³ Philip Stanhope and his sons lived in Geneva. Many British lovers of Swiss nature had Swiss scenes engraved by famous artists like Hentzi and others. In England itself works by Lavater, and Gessner's *Idylls*, were being read in English translations.

But this English interest in Switzerland provoked, in its turn, an intense interest in England among many Swiss. In Geneva the publication in 1726 of the *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français*, by Béat de Mural, created a sensation in a society which was growing tired of French influence and tutelage. And Geneva did not cease, during the whole of the century, from taking an interest in things English, a fascination which was to reach its climax in the founding by the Pictet brothers in 1796 of the 'Bibliothèque britannique'. That journal so courageously defended England's liberal ideas on the Continent that Talleyrand was prompted to say to Pictet de Rochemont: 'Your review has behind it such a weight of public opinion that its suppression would amount to a coup d'état'. And Sismondi added: 'Geneva is a town which speaks and writes French, but thinks and reads English'.

In Zurich, J. J. Bodmer discovered England on reading *The Spectator*, and disseminated her ideas through the periodical which he himself founded with some friends — *Die Discourse der Mahlern* (1721-23). He subsequently translated Milton's *Paradise Lost* into German. Bodmer's enthusiasm soon spread to wider circles, and it was under his influence that Wieland translated 22 of Shakespeare's plays, which were then published in Zurich by Orelli, Gessner & Co. Thanks to Bodmer, Shakespeare was even to be read by a humble Toggenburg peasant, Uli Braecker, who wrote the astonishing *Etwas über Shakespeare*.

Numerous other Swiss, such as Albert de Haller, Gaudenz de Salis-Seewis, Bridel, Madame de Montolieu, Samuel Constant, Johannes von Müller⁴ and Vincenz Bernhard von Tscharnier,⁵ found inspiration in English models, in the field of either literature, politics, philosophy or agriculture. For a short while Switzerland became the channel through which English ideas flowed to the Continent, and from her sprang a new flowering of German letters.

It goes without saying that such anglophile feelings increased Swiss visits to England and had a very favourable influence on the welcome accorded to the Swiss and Genevans by English society. Truth to tell, Monsieur de Voltaire mocked this enthusiasm: "*Genève*" he said "*imite l'Angleterre comme la grenouille imite le bœuf. Elle est le Gille de l'Angleterre.*"

¹ This was the way in which Voltaire signed a letter to George Keate from Monrion, near Lausanne, on 17th February 1757 (British Museum. Add. MSS., 30991, Fol. 4, Best. 6466).

² Geneva was not to enter the Confederation (with Vaud, Valais and Neuchâtel) before 1814.

³ *The Letters of Edward Gibbon* (London 1956) vol. ii: Letters of Edward Gibbon to Suzanne Curchod 1758-63.

⁴ Edgar Bonjour, *Johannes von Müllers Verhältnis zu England* (Basel 1957).

⁵ Conrad Bäschlin, *Die Blütezeit der ökonomischen Gesellschaft in Bern 1759-1766* (Laupen 1913).

(To be continued.)