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Autor: Fischer, Béat de
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SWISS IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by
Béat de Fischer

(Former Ambassador to the Court of St. James's.)

(Concluded)

V

The enrolment in English of Genevan and Swiss soldiers during the eighteenth century is explained by a twofold factor: on the one hand, the hostile attitude of Louis XIV towards the Protestants, whom he drove out of France by means of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, had shocked the Protestant cantons and had encouraged them to be more liberal in their policy of considering recruitment also for nations other than France. Louis XIV had, moreover, upset the Swiss by constructing the fortress of Huningen just outside Basle, by occupying Strasbourg in spite of its federal links with the Swiss, by reducing the pay of the Swiss regiments in France and by limiting the commercial privileges of Swiss tradesmen in France. On the other hand, the Protestant Genevans and Neuchâtelais, who did not benefit from the 'capitulations' signed by the Thirteen Cantons, at that time liked to offer their sword to Protestant powers.

So it happened that in 1692 William III was able to conclude in Zurich a treaty of 'Offensive and Defensive Union', the parties being, on the one side, the Protestant cantons and the town of St. Gall, and on the other side His Britannic Majesty 'for the services of Holland'. Thanks to this arrangement, it was possible for Lord Galloway and Jean de Sacconay, of Bursinel, to sign in 1695 a 'capitulation' for the levy of a Swiss regiment 1,600 strong. This excellent corps, comprising mainly Vaudois and four companies of the former Oberkan Regiment, rendered important services to the Duke of Marlborough when fighting against the armies of Louis XIV in the sieges of Kaiserswerth, Venloo, Ruremonde, Liège, Huy and Limbourg (1702-3), actions which were celebrated in Berne as if they were Switzerland's own achievements.

But already in the years 1689 to 1692, during the Irish campaign, the British sovereign had employed several Swiss officers, whose valour he had no doubt had occasion to recognise in Holland (they were de la Bastide, Bonnard, de Bonstetten, Desjean, d'Erlach, de Morsier, de Montmollin, de Saussure, de Steiger and Vischer).

However, it was principally in the American Colonies and in India that our regiments and our individual officers and soldiers fought in large numbers for the British crown, although some of them served at home also. Peter Elias, of Berne, for instance, introduced physical training into the Royal Navy and the British Army. With Sir Luke Schaub as intermediary, four companies of 140 men each and an artillery company of 71 men had been recruited in 1751 for the East India Company.³¹ Once in India, they were incorporated into Major Lawrence's, and Captain Clive's small army and lined up against the French, who were then thrown out of the country. In these companies, two officers distinguished themselves particularly: Daniel Frischmann, who became Commandant of the Comorin Province and Governor of Madras, and Colonel Louis Henri Polier, to whom the Calcutta command was entrusted. According to Sir John Fortescue and Malleison, Clive's real teachers were the two Swiss captains, Paradis of Fribourg and de Gingins of Vaud. Another unit, Count Charles-Daniel de Meuron's (1738-1806) Swiss Regiment,

entered His Britannic Majesty's service in Ceylon in 1795, the Netherlands having been occupied by France and its allegiance to the Stadthouder brought to an end. In 1799 it joined General J. Harris's army and achieved wonders in the historic capture of Seringa Patham, the capital of Tippoo Sahib, when the Swiss grenadiers and light infantry formed the vanguard. At the end of the campaign Major-General Pierre-Frédéric de Meuron, the brother of the proprietor of the regiment, became Governor of Ceylon.

In America there were Swiss in the Royal American Regiment,³² formed at the request of the British Parliament in 1754 by Henri Bouquet (1719-66), of Rolle, and Frédéric Haldimand (1718-91), of Yverdon. This corps, which, apart from the two Swiss battalions, was composed of four battalions of Scots and Dutch, had the task of repelling the French of Canada and of ensuring communications between the various forts along the whole territory under English control. Placed under the orders of the British Commander-in-Chief, this regiment was used in the defence of Canada in 1758-59; in the struggle against the Red Indians in 1763-64, when Henri Bouquet covered himself with a glory that still shines today; and in the American War of Independence (1775-83). Bouquet carried British rule beyond the Alleghany Mountains and into the Ohio Valley. Frédéric Haldimand organised the defence of Canada, which he succeeded in preserving for the British crown through his skilful handling of the situation. The three Prévost brothers, of Geneva, Augustin (1723-86), Jacques (1725-76) and Marc (1736-81), distinguished themselves during these campaigns. Augustin in particular helped defend Georgia and Florida against the American rebels.

But many of these officers also made names as administrators: Henri Bouquet became Governor of the Southern Colonies; Major-General Augustin Prévost Governor of Georgia; Sir Frederic Haldimand Governor of Montreal, then of Florida, and finally, from 1778 till 1804, Governor-General of Canada, Sir George Prévost (1767-1816) was Governor of Nova Scotia, then Governor-General of Canada (1812-14) also. These last two owed their high office, apart from personal merit, to the twofold fact that they were at once French-speaking and Protestant, which made them acceptable to both the English and the Canadians. 'A French-speaking Protestant', the latter would say, 'is a Swiss'.

Sir Frederic Haldimand's³³ record of service is impressive: he reconciled the Catholic French Canadians to British rule; he established law and order in a country devastated by 20 years of war; he introduced the constitutional government of 1784, built the first canal in the country, created its first public library and organised the colony's defence system so that his successor, Sir George Prévost, was able to hold it in 1812 against the United States in spite of their twelve-fold superiority in numbers. Several historians (Kingston, J. Winsor, Sir C. P. Lucas, MacIlwraith, for instance) have called him one of the 'makers of Canada'. Unfortunately, the last years of his mandate were marred by the attacks of a journalist called Pierre du Calvet, who accused him of being a tyrant. These accusations were fully refuted, but nevertheless they did obscure his glory for a short time.

It may be of interest to note here that almost all the Secretaries of the first Governors-General of Canada were Swiss, mainly Vaudois; Conrad Gugy, J. Bruyère, H. Cramahé, F. Mourrier, F. Mazères, F. L. Genevay.³⁴

In this chapter the colonial achievements of two very enterprising gentlemen should also be mentioned. Attracted

by the great possibilities of America, Christof de Graffenried (1661-1743),³⁵ Seigneur of Worb (Berne), founded in 1710 a colony of Bernese and German peasants between the Trent and the News in North Carolina. He called it New-Bern and became himself Landgrave of Carolina, Baron of Bernburg and honorary citizen of London. This agglomeration still exists and the American branch of the de Graffenried family is flourishing. In his turn, Jean Pierre de Pury (1673-1736), of Neuchâtel, arrived in South Carolina in 1730 and established there for George II a colony of Swiss and Neuchâtelois bearing the name of Purrysburg. His son Charles succeeded him as commander of this place.

VI

Eighteenth-century English diplomats of Swiss origin form the last group in this essay. English reluctance to accept appointments abroad, and the fact, moreover, that William III and his first successors sought support for their policies from the Whigs, who were close to the City, but who did not, at first, have at their disposal enough diplomats of their own to defend the Crown's interests abroad, explain why they often had recourse to foreigners, including some Swiss Protestants.³⁶

This was the case when George I sent as Ambassador to Schönbrunn (1718-27) General and Admiral François Louis de Pesme de St-Saphorin (1668-1737). Already knowing the Viennese Court very well, he was one of the diplomats best informed on European affairs, and was much sought after. In Holland he had made the acquaintance of Lord Townsend, the father-in-law of Robert Walpole and, like the latter, a leader of the Whig party, and it was Townsend and Walpole who proposed his name to the British sovereign. He being a foreigner and therefore incapable of becoming a British Ambassador, the difficulty was circumvented by giving him letters from the

Hanoverian Chancellor.³⁷ After being considerably active in his new post, he had to leave it because George I had openly criticised the Pragmatic Sanction. He later attended the coronation of George II, when he also met Voltaire, whose *Henriade* he possessed. St-Saphorin being known for the inordinate length of his despatches, it became a joke to call any long official letter a 'St-Saphorin'.

King George I made use as well of the talents of another Swiss, Sir Luke Schaub³⁸ (1690-1758), of Basle, who became one of the best-known British diplomats of his day. He was sent first to Vienna and then to Madrid where he acted as an English agent. In Hanover he had to maintain friendly terms between the two Courts. Personal Secretary of the King, knighted in 1720, close friend of Lord Carteret, he took charge from 1721 to 1724, when he was 31, of the British Embassy in Paris with credentials as Ambassador (although he was an alien). After this and a short mission to Poland he continued to play a certain part in diplomatic affairs in London and became a favourite companion of George II.

Less spectacular were the activities of Kaspar Wettstein,³⁹ Lord Carteret's secretary and teacher of German during the war of the Austrian Succession (1743).

It is perhaps worth mentioning here, in addition, three distinguished families of British diplomats with Swiss origins: the Mallets, the Moriers and the de Salis, whose progenitors settled in England towards the end of the eighteenth century.

CONCLUSION

It was the London and the country houses of these diplomats, writers, bankers and patrons of the arts; the chambers of these scholars, scientists and philosophers; the studios, finally, of these Swiss artists, that Monsieur de Voltaire and his eighteenth-century contemporaries might have visited.



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His presence there would no doubt have been warmly welcomed. His memory remains alive in one salon at least: that of the Bernese lady, Maria Grossholz, who became Madame Tussaud and who, in her famous museum in London, placed his wax effigy modelled from life⁴⁰ in the tableau of King Louis XVI and his family, where we can still contemplate his witty face and his searching gaze. One of his visitors there will surely have been Mr. E. V. Rieu, of Geneva, Editor of the Penguin Classics in London, 1944-64, who is the great-great-grandson of Henri Rieu, of Geneva (1721-87), one of Voltaire's *confidants* and *agents d'affaires*.

³¹ J. E. Kilchenmann, *Schweizer Söldner im Dienste der engl.-ostindischen Kompanie in der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Gümligen 1911). Arnold Lätt, *Der Anteil der Schweizer an der Eroberung Indiens* (Zurich 1934).

³² Arnold Lätt, *Schweizer Offiziere als Indianerkrieger und Instrukteure der englischen leichten Infanterie* (Zurich 1933).

³³ Arnold Lätt, *Zwei schweizer General-Gouverneure in Kanada* (Zurich 1926).

³⁴ R. L. de Roquebrune, 'Les Suisses au Canada', *Journal de Genève* (6 juin 1966).

³⁵ Thomas P. de Graffenried, *History of the de Graffenried Family* (New York 1925).

³⁶ D. B. Horn *The British Diplomatic Service 1689-1789* (Oxford 1961).

³⁷ D. B. Horn, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

³⁸ D. B. Horn, *op. cit.*, p. 39. Rudolf Massini, *Sir Luke Schaub (1660-1758)* (Basle 1953).

³⁹ Andreas Staehelin, 'Der England-Basler Kaspar Wettstein', *Basler Zeitschrift* (1959), lvii.

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