

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1973)
Heft: 1675

Artikel: Gibbons's Swiss heritage
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692156>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 31.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

GIBBON'S SWISS HERITAGE

To many a Swiss residing in the Canton of Vaud, the name Edward Gibbon is loosely connected with "that eccentric English historian" of the 18th century, whose path, incidentally, is rarely crossed except in the narrow confines of the *Rue Edward Gibbon* in Lausanne. For Gibbon, this was his earthly paradise where he lived, wrote and compiled his major work "*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*". The plan that had formed in Gibbon's mind whilst in Rome in 1764 was brought triumphantly to completion some 23 years later, on the terrace of his summer-house in Lausanne where he wrote the last lines of the greatest historical work in the English language.



Gibbon's early life was one of continual illness, yet he appears to have been an infant prodigy, proceeding from various schools and tutors to Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1752 at the tender age of 15. According to his own testimony, he arrived at the University "with a stock of erudition which might have puzzled a doctor and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed". This proved to be "the most idle and unprofitable 14 months of (his) life". Following an act of juvenile apostasy (temporary conversion to Catholicism) he was expelled from Oxford and banished by his father to Lausanne. In Gibbon's words, his childish revolt against the religion of his country had led him to the bright paths of philosophic freedom. His classical education was hence received at the hands of a Swiss Calvinist pastor, Rev. Pavillard, at Lausanne.

The change was complete. Gibbon was now under strict surveillance, in great discomfort and with the scantiest allowance; yet he always spoke of this period with gratitude. To Pavillard he owed his scholarship and the formation of regular habits of study. He mastered the bulk of classical Latin literature, also studying mathematics and logic, to

become within five years perfectly conversant with the language and literature of France. During the latter part of his exile Gibbon entered more freely into Lausanne society, attending Voltaire's stage productions, forming an enduring friendship with a young Swiss, Georges Deyverdun, and falling madly in love with Suzanne Curchod, later to become Mme. Necker, wife of the banker to Louis XVI.

In 1758 he returned with mingled joy and regret to England easily settling down as a sober, discreet, calculating Epicurean philosopher. His father on hearing of the strange alliance between himself and Mlle. Curchod disapproved most strongly. After a painful struggle Gibbon yielded to his fate: in his own famous phrase — "I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son". After publishing his "*Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*" in 1761. Gibbon soon turned his interest towards a possible subject for historical composition. He conceived of topics such as Richard the Lion Heart, the life of Walter Raleigh, the rule of the Medici in Renaissance Florence and had long pondered on the history of the liberty of the Swiss. How fortunate that in spite of his ideas he reserved judgment for a little longer.

A "philosophic historian"

At the end of the Seven Years War, Gibbon left England again to tour the Continent. From Paris, where he made the acquaintance of Diderot, d'Alembert and others of that literary circle, he travelled to Lausanne, to form during his year's sojourn, a lasting friendship with the inimitable Lord Sheffield. Once into Italy and his destination Rome, he "trod with a lofty step the ruins of the forum: each memorable spot where Romulus stood or Tully spoke or Caesar fell was at once present to (his) eye". It was thus amidst the ruins of the Capitol that Gibbon was inspired to write of the decline and fall of the city.

As a historian, whether in his "Autobiography" or even through the august prose of his "*Decline and Fall*", Gibbon shows an unmistakable vitality if not enthusiasm for life and its historical past. Three main influences unalterably affected his writings. At first it was his introduction to the new philosophy of the 18th century, whilst at Lausanne; then his discovery of Montesquieu; and lastly the puzzling questions surrounding the Later Roman Empire and the Middle Ages.

The connection between Switzerland and Gibbon's writings is quite definable. What Holland had been in the seventeenth, Switzerland had become in the eighteenth century. It was the haven to which philosophy had fled from English indifference, French censorship and Italian persecution. There gathered

Pietro Giannone, Montesquieu and Voltaire. This vigorous circle had its centre among the liberal Calvinist ministers of Geneva and Lausanne. Switzerland effectively introduced Gibbon to the 18th century Enlightenment and to the great works of 17th century scholarship. He said as much himself in his "Autobiography" . . . "*Such as I am in genius or learning or manners I owe my creation to Lausanne: it was in that school that the statue was discovered in the block of marble . . . If my childish revolt against the religion of my country had not stripped me in time of my academic gown, the five important years so liberally improved in the studies and conversation of Lausanne would have been steeped in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford*".

Gibbon's indebtedness to Switzerland

Above all, at Lausanne, Gibbon discovered Montesquieu and his great work '*L'esprit des Lois*'. It was the most powerful single inspiration of his years of study! His delight in Lausanne was "in the frequent perusal of Montesquieu, whose energy of style and boldness of hypothesis were forceful examples of a true philosophic historian". From him he learned that human history is not a mere pageant of dramatic (or undramatic) events but a process governed in its detail by a complex of social forces which a "philosophic historian" could isolate and describe. . .

If Montesquieu had pointed the way to write history what subject should Gibbon choose? All famous historians respond to some extent to the demands of their age. The historians of the 18th century turned back to the distant past and asked questions mainly about the declining Roman Empire, the Dark and Middle Ages of Europe. That Gibbon should have taken up this challenge seems in retrospect almost inevitable. The modern themes which had haunted his mind never caused him to suspend his classical studies; yet what historian could face so huge a subject? Gibbon had thought convincingly of the liberty of the Swiss. Switzerland had broken away from the feudal and clerical domination of the Habsburgs and the Vatican. As a result, it had become the haven of all those European heretics who had challenged the tyranny of their native traditions: of Erasmus, of Calvin, of Castellio, of the English republicans, of the French Huguenots, of the Vaudois of Savoy, of the philosophers of the 18th century. What a splendid subject for a "philosophic historian" who himself owed his philosophy to Lausanne! Gibbon wrote of it with enthusiasm but sadly the materials were locked away in an old barbarous German dialect — life was too short to start learning German.

Swiss liberty was to provide the

laboratory for the development of his ideas of a new enlightenment, but could the same process be adapted to the medieval history of Rome itself? To Gibbon's romantic spirit, the crumbling arches and grass-grown amphitheatres presented an epitome of the whole process which so fascinated his contemporaries. Yet the seed did not germinate at once. Gibbon's mind returned to Switzerland, that Switzerland to which he owed so much: his intellectual formation, the friends of his life — Georges Deyverdun, Lord Sheffield — and to which he himself would return to spend his later years. Deyverdun thus became his German translator and in 1767 they published their first book in French. Some critics, including David Hume, attacked him for writing in French. Gibbon but dismissed them with impunity.

A monumental work

At length Gibbon decided to seize the whole problem: the decline and fall of Rome was transformed into the decline and fall of the Empire. That vast subject stretching from Antiquity to the Renaissance, from Europe through Arabia to China and covering over 1,300 years of history was extensively written after Gibbon's return to Lausanne in 1783 until its completion four years later. Journeying back to England for its final publication in 1787, he soon tired of life there and so returned to Switzerland the following year cherishing vague schemes of fresh literary activity. However, Deyverdun's death and the great thunderstorms of the French Revolution troubled his repose and, visiting London in 1793 to consult his physicians on some ailment, he was taken ill and died within a few weeks, on the 16th January, 1794.

What Gibbon had left posterity was more than just a monumental work; it was the criterion by which he had judged civilization and progress. It was the measure in which the happiness of men was secured, and of that happiness he considered political freedom an essential condition. A condition, so Gibbon tells us, which stemmed from his first contact with "... the temperate air, the serene sky, the silver orb of the moon reflecting on the waters of Lake Léman, and nature's silence — the forgotten past ... I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on recovery of my freedom and, perhaps, the establishment of my fame; but my pride was soon humbled and a sober melancholy spread across my mind that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that whatever might be the future outcome of my history the life of the historian must be short and precarious". Short and precarious it might be; but it had already been long enough to bring together and to answer in one majestic work, the problems which had exercised all the greatest historical minds of that most inquisitive, most penetrating, most inspiring of generations, the generation of the Enlightenment.

SWISS PRESENCE IN INDIA

During a trip to India last October, your Editor naturally had an eye for things Swiss in this vast country. In the following article, we report on evidence of Swiss commercial and industrial presence. We shall continue this report in the next issue.

The front page of the *Times of India* of 8th October last reported on an important loan agreement with Switzerland. A picture showed the Swiss ambassador to New Delhi, Mr. Fritz Real, and the Indian Secretary for Economic Affairs, Mr. M.G. Kaul, signing a document which provided for about 100 million francs of credits at very advantageous conditions for the purchase of capital equipment and the financing of a new power-transmission scheme.

This agreement, one of many that have been concluded between the two countries, illustrated the fact that India is the country receiving the greatest amount of Swiss aid. Given the size of its population, this is hardly surprising. The presence and importance of this aid is acknowledged by most literate Indians.

Switzerland's impact on Indian economy is strongest, however, in the field of private enterprise. Although Indian law requires that all "foreign" companies should be controlled by Indian capital and Indian executives, many important firms have Swiss names attesting to their Swiss origin. This is the case of Hindustan Brown Boveri, which is the major producer of electrical transmission and switchgear in the country. It employs over 2,000 workers. About forty per cent of its capital is still Swiss and there are still a handful of Swiss executives in the company.

While driving south of Madras, we were surprised to find a signpost standing

out of paddy fields pointing to the "Advani Oerlikon Electrode Factory". Buhle Oerlikon, a world leader in welding technology, had obviously exported their know-how to India.

A large textile business bearing the name of "Helvetia Trading Corporation" stands out on Waterloo Street, once an elegant Victorian road, now one of the decrepit, dirty and beggar-ridden streets of Calcutta. This establishment is round the corner to the Great Eastern Hotel, once the best hotel in West Bengal, and still the place to eat in Calcutta. "Helvetia Trading Corporation" is now owned by Bengalis. Only one of the dozen men whom I met there busy cutting and measuring cloth, could speak English. He was the Manager. He explained that the business had been sold by its Swiss owner a long time ago. The owner had gone back to Switzerland and died five years ago.

In the centre of Madras, a large and well lit tailor's shop stands prominently with the sign "Tailor of Switzerland". The owner was however a genuine Tamil who had learnt his trade in Switzerland.

The largest patisserie we have seen in India, a place called *Wenger* at Connaught Circus, in the centre of Delhi, might well have been of Swiss origin judging from the name and some of the continental cakes on sale. Owing to the presence of a large crowd of buyers, it was not possible to get confirmation from the Manager.



Street in Calcutta