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DICKENS IN SWITZERLAND

by Geoffrey H. Buchler, Ph.D.



Charles Dickens (by courtesy of Radio Times-Hulton Picture Library).

Charles Dickens, the most popular and perhaps the greatest of English novelists, fell in love with Switzerland at first sight. In 1844, aged thirty-two, he was returning from a holiday in Genoa and arrived at Domodossola by coach on a freezing November night. His travelling companions were only too glad to dine and drop into a warm bed, but not so the novelist. Accompanied by his servant, Louis Roche, he managed to hire a horse-drawn sleigh and pushed on into Switzerland over the mighty Simplon Pass. It was a crisp, starlit night. Wakeful and alert, Dickens drank in the sensation of the threatening mountains, the

thundering torrents and the tortuous roads. It all made an indelible impression on his mind and was to be used as a background for some of his future writings — in "Little Dorrit" (1855–57) for example.

Once over the pass the two men continued by coach, and after three days and two nights almost without rest, they sank gratefully into sleep in a Fribourg hotel.

Crossing the Devil's Bridge

The dramatic difference between smoky England, still deeply enmeshed in

its Industrial Revolution, and the pure air and beauty of Switzerland struck Dickens so forcibly that he decided on a second visit as soon as possible. At the end of the same year he returned to spend Christmas with his family who had stayed on in Genoa. The following June they all left for London, this time via the Great St. Gotthard Pass. Summer impressions were quite different from winter, nature, wearing a friendlier look; more green than white. Dickens wrote to his friend John Forster, describing the coach journey from Andermatt to Altdorf: "On both sides there are places of terrible grandeur, unsurpassable, I should imagine, in the whole world. The Devil's Bridge — Terrific! . . . O God! What a beautiful country it is!"

Back home again he plunged into a two-year frenzy of overwork, writing, acting and editing; but his health began to suffer and he complained of migraine and fits of dizziness. In April, 1846, he wrote to his patroness, Miss Burdett-Coutts: "I have conceived the idea of going to Switzerland for more than a year . . . I have a long book to write which I could do better in retirement . . . I want to get up some mountain knowledge in all the four seasons of the year for purposes of fiction."

Accordingly, in June, the whole Dickens family arrived in Lausanne and booked in at the Hotel Gibon, named after the famous English historian Edward Gibbon, who had completed his "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" there. Curiously, the hotel spelt his name with only one "b", possibly because the French word "gibbon" means an ape. But with his wife, Catherine, his six children and his sister-in-law, Georgina, the Dickens "ménage" totalled nine, making hotel life a trifle expensive. Fortunately, they were soon able to rent the delightful Villa Rosemont which suited them perfectly. Set in a rose-garden on a gentle slope overlooking Lac Léman, it gave a superb view of the clear waters and the ever-changing mountain landscape on the opposite shore. While his young son, Charley, was sent to a local weekly boarding school, a French governess was engaged for the two elder girls, Mary and Katey. With the family settled, Dickens got to work on his new novel, "Dombey

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and Son." Even so there was plenty of social life too, and many opportunities to make real friends. One of the best-loved was William Haldimand, a Swiss who had emigrated to England and became M.P. for Ipswich — an astonishing feat for a foreigner. On return to his own country Haldimand spent the rest of his life in charitable works, including the building of free public baths for the poor of Lausanne.

Meeting social reformers

During his stay the writer met many Swiss reformers, amongst whom were doctors working for better prison conditions, and the alleviation of suffering for the blind, deaf and mentally deranged. Swiss schools impressed him greatly with their insistence on firm but humane discipline and their stress on the importance of learning foreign languages — especially English. He wryly compared them with such wretched establishments as his Dotheboys Hall, in "Nicholas Nickleby" (1838), which disgraced the educational scene at home. It was also surprising to find in the centre of Europe, a small, developing country which had somehow escaped the worst consequences of the industrial revolution, a revolution for the victims of which in England he so actively and compassionately campaigned. During his sunset walks through the vineyards or along the edge of the lake, Charles Dickens often pondered the riddle of the disparity between the two countries, both of which he dearly loved.

Many visitors enlivened the scene at the Villa Rosemont, including Tennyson, Ainsworth and Marc Brunel; the latter being the first man to tunnel the Thames and the father of the even more famous Isambard, of Great Western Railway fame. In fact, life at Lausanne was idyllic and as his health returned Dickens felt further the urge for more exploration. He was much stronger now and was even able to tackle a ten-hour stint on mule-back, an endurance test poor Catherine and Georgina were forced to share. He soon arranged a trip to the nearby canton of the Valais and on to Chamonix. The party returned via the "Château de Chillon," already immortalised by Byron, where Dickens penned a vivid picture of the medieval castle, describing the torture-chambers and "a horrible trap

whence prisoners were cast out into the lake."

Up the St. Bernard Pass

Despite the exhaustion from this expedition he wanted to see still more of Switzerland and so decided that a visit to the Hospice of St. Bernard would help him with the background for "Little Dorrit." He rallied eight friends plus Catherine and Georgina and the party set off from Lausanne by steamer on a golden September day. They spent the first night at Martigny, travelling on to



Dickens' Swiss Chalet (by courtesy of Radio Times-Hulton Picture Library).

eventually reach the warm welcome of the monks at the Hospice of St. Bernard. A sweet-smelling wood fire blazed in the refectory and the guests dined off "hot soup, a roast joint and warmed wine." Then the ladies and gentlemen were shown into separate rooms for a blissful sleep. Dickens questioned the monks closely about their work, also absorbed the lonely atmosphere, and took a great liking to the intelligent St. Bernard dogs. Subsequently, he had several sent over to England and his favourite, Linda, was by his side when he died.

However, and regardless of the heady exhilaration of mountain travel, the serious writer in Dickens was sometimes home-sick for foggy London

and its teeming masses and the pulsating life of the world's greatest city. Perhaps he felt a tinge of conscience, too, that he was enjoying life in this semi-paradise whilst at home so many men, women, children and animals were sorely maltreated. Of course he would soon return to fight for them again, but just now, there were still new scenes and exciting experiences to be tasted.

Autumn found him back in Lausanne, writing the final chapters of "Dombey and Son." This finished, he took Charley to Geneva to buy him a Swiss watch as a reward for his progress at school. It so happened that at the same time, a minor revolution was in progress between the Conservative and Radical parties. Fortunately, within days, this temporary uprising was over and a compromise was reached, but not before a stray bullet had shattered the mirror in Dickens' hotel room. On this incident, and after reflection, he wrote to his poet friend Walter Savage Landor: "Don't be too hard on the Swiss. They are a thorn in the side of European despots — my hat shall ever be ready to be thrown up and my glove ever ready to be thrown down for Switzerland."

Burning the candle at both ends

For the next seven years words poured from Charles Dickens' prolific pen and this combined well with the numerous lectures he gave. Once more it was clear that he was over-taxing his strength and he knew that the only antidote was to see his peaceful Switzerland again. It was to be the last time. Accompanied only by his theatrical agent, Wilkie Collins, and the painter, Augustus Egg, he set off in the late summer of 1853 for Lausanne. There he still found many friends who talked nostalgically about the old days at the Villa Rosemont. Yet time was short and he wanted to show his companions the Simplon Pass while it was still open. They were in the main most impressed, and the picturesque mountain background was later used for Dickens' play "No Thoroughfare," which was staged both in London and Paris. On his return home a delightful surprise was in store for him. His actor friend, Albert Fechter, had sent a small wooden Swiss chalet in ninety-four prefabricated parts. Dickens had this erected in the garden of his home at Gads Hill, near Rochester. He made it into his study, and it thus became a constant reminder of all those happy days spent in Switzerland. Although he still had seventeen years to live, Dickens never saw his beloved country again. Mounting pressure of work, indeed a phase of life almost entirely filled with his new activity of giving public readings from his works, continued to wear him down. This was coupled with his frequent travels to America, where he reached his final popularity and perhaps his final collapse — a combination supremely American! He was playing a very dangerous game for a man approaching sixty.

On the 8th June, 1870, the novelist

had been writing all day in the Swiss chalet with his St. Bernard, Linda, for company. The next evening, dropping from his chair at the dinner-table, Charles Dickens died, in his fifty-eighth year. Together with the fact that he had long ago began burning the candle at both ends, one should consider that there have been few men with so great and glorious a candle to burn and although the love for his wife had withered a long time before, his passion for England and Switzerland burned on brightly right to the end.

COMMENT

SHOULD CITIZENS VOTE ON "TECHNICAL" ISSUES

The way the people voted on the 8th December Referendum highlighted the difficulties involved in giving extensive legislative powers to the people, particularly in tax matters. The most important issues at stake on that Sunday were those involving a proposed increase in direct Federal taxation and a demand to put a brake on public expenditure. There were other non-Cantonal issues, but the "Chevallaz Package", as the two main questions were called, carried the most weight because of the heavy deficit incurred by the State.

In a show of apparent bad mood reflecting these inflationary times, the Swiss said "no" to more taxes and "yes" to a cut in public expenditure. The

second vote turned out to be a useless exercise in view of the response to the first question. The possibility of envisaging more expenditure could only arise if the State were given more means.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the result of the vote. One immediate comment is that it is remarkable that the whole population of a country should be given the opportunity to decide on the level of their taxes. How more democratic can one be? The Constitutional article that provides for a vote on the limits of federal taxation inherently respects the judgement of the people even in technical matters. Mr. Georges-Andre Chevallaz, Head of the Department of Finance, will naturally respect this judgement and try to find some way out of his problems.

The question that should be asked, though, is whether the soundness of popular judgement obtains in matters where people's pockets are concerned. Did the Swiss refuse to give more means to the State because they genuinely and rationally believed that the State was getting over-committed? Or did they vote the way they did because they were fed up with price rises and their stagnating standard of living?

It is quite possible that many voters decided to withhold tax revenue from the State because the latter's importance was becoming overwhelming. Such an attitude would be in keeping with federalism, provided the Cantons were given more income. The tendency these past years has been to increase the financial weight

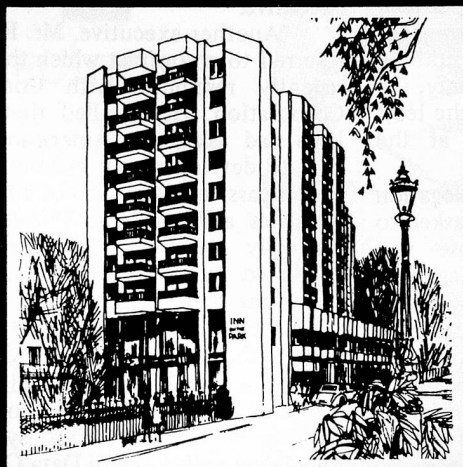
of the Confederation and its support to Cantons. But the Confederation still only administers a third of total public expenditure in Switzerland. Moreover, this expenditure is, proportionally, still the lowest in Europe.

It seems, however, more likely that the people's primary concern was to protect their buying power. In which case the vote was guided by immediate self-interest and not enlightened at all. It pointed to a lack of awareness of what the Federal State is doing for the lives of every citizen. People expect Old Age Insurance to be doubled and schools of technology to be built without paying for it. It's a traditional case of wanting to have one's cake and eat it.

No wonder, then, that Mr. Chevallaz expressed some disappointment at the outcome of the 8th December vote. The only way out is to cut the Federal Budget drastically to avoid the 1.5 billion franc loss generally predicted. The 1975 Budget is giving him extraordinary problems because of the straight-jacket situation which has resulted from the 8th December vote, and the prospect of the people rejecting plans to increase petrol tax. The 1975 budget will probably be discussed during a special session of Parliament.

There is little scope for compressing this budget. It is well-nigh impossible to reduce federal contribution to Old Age Insurance, or to reduce administrative and military expenditure. Some of the chapters that could be hit might be foreign aid and scientific research. These

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