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# RELATIONS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND SWITZERLAND

*At an Open Meeting of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique on 22nd January, Monsieur Jean-Jacques Indermuehle, Counsellor for Cultural Affairs at the Swiss Embassy, gave a most interesting talk on the development of relations between Great Britain and Switzerland. The President of the NSH, Mrs. Mariann Meier, introduced the speaker and thanked him after the fascinating exposé on behalf of a most appreciative audience. We have great pleasure in reproducing Monsieur Indermuehle's talk. The first part appears below and will be continued in subsequent issues of the Swiss Observer.*

In our modern world, it is perfectly obvious that no country can live isolated; its very existence, its very way of life is conditioned by what goes on not only just across its borders, but also by what happens farther afield. Statesmen nowadays never cease repeating that we are living in a world of interdependence, politically as well as economically. Although we may be more aware of this fact in our times than in the past centuries, it nevertheless also holds good when we take a look at European history in general and at Swiss history in particular. One cannot understand Switzerland's growth without setting it into relation to the historical evolution of its neighbours. Jakob Burckhardt, the famous Swiss historian, once stated that, here I translate approximately: "The true study of our nation's history is that which considers the homeland in relation to world history and its laws." If such a statement has a meaning regarding Switzerland and her neighbours, can it also apply to relations between Switzerland and an Island Kingdom, England? Did not this world power play an essential part in Switzerland's

development? Was she not at times a matter of life and death for Switzerland? Carl Spitteler, the Swiss scholar said in a famous speech, Our Swiss Standpoint, delivered at the beginning of the First World War: "We are particularly grateful to the English, for England stood by us more than once in times of great danger. England is not Switzerland's only friend, but she is also her most reliable friend."

Relations between Great Britain, an island lying off the shores of the European continent, and Switzerland, a landlocked country in the heart of Europe, may seem rather odd at first glance. Yet, closer scrutiny shows how much more substance there is in them than one might expect. Their interests often coincided and although Switzerland probably owes more on balance to England than England to Switzerland, both reaped considerable benefits from their long friendship.

Souvenirs go right back to Roman times. Soldiers of the Rhaetian legions recruited in that Alpine province to which the present canton of the Grisons then belonged, were standing guard for imperial Rome behind Hadrian's wall.

Tombstones have been found near some of the castra with inscriptions praising the valour of certain officers whose task was to keep the wild and barbarous Picts, precursors of the Scots, out of Roman Britain, the land of peace and plenty.

The next contacts in ancient history seem to be of a religious nature. In the sixth and seventh centuries missionaries arriving, somewhat inexplicably, from Ireland, evangelised the country. The most notable were St. Columbanus whose influence spread to the Jura and who preached to what remained of the Romanised Celtic population around lakes Zürich and Constance; and St. Gallus, after whom the abbey and city of St. Gallen were named. Shortly before the Norman invasion and conquest of England, a Swiss, Ermenfroy, Bishop of Sion en Valais, was sent to this country as the Pope's legate to appoint a new Bishop of Worcester, and other ecclesiastical dignitaries and to visit the churches of England. His task was also to enlighten King Edward the Confessor's private conscience and to hasten the foundation of Westminster Abbey. Ermenfroy's name appears, too, in connection with William the Conqueror. It was he who conducted a great service of repentance for all the sins and violence committed by the King's armies.

Having claimed Ermenfroy as a Swiss, we may, no doubt, also lay claim to William of Grandson, Bishop of Exeter between 1349 and 1400. This Vaudois bishop was one of a great number of



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knights and churchmen from Western Switzerland who had followed their overlord Count Peter of Savoy, Earl of Richmond, when he went to help his son-in-law, Henry III, in his struggle against the unruly barons of England.

Since Women's Year has now become a historical fact, it would also be fair to render women their due and to mention that Swiss women, too, came early to England. They seemed even to have been a real threat to the young women of this island. There was a complaint that so many pretty maids were being imported from what is now the canton of Vaud that the noble English families began to fear for the matrimonial chances of their own daughters. Bishop William's sister, Catherine, Countess of Salisbury, is described as the greatest of beauties of her days. She is further said to have been the lady who dropped the all too famous garter which was afterwards used as the emblem of the "Most Noble Order".

It was probably in the field of religion that ties between England and Switzerland were closest. The Reformation brought the two countries into a spiritual relationship, the effects of which are still apparent to this day. At the beginning, Switzerland was at the giving end. The heads of the Church of England honoured the Swiss reformers as their teachers and protectors. Many church leaders who were persecuted under Mary fled to their brothers in Switzerland. We need not stress the importance of what a place like Geneva gave to Scotland through John Knox, who figures prominently at the Reformation wall, as it is called, in Geneva besides other great figures like Calvin. The latter's teachings on the State, on human rights and on sovereignty were shared by the English. Calvinism was the father of English puritanism. Both England and Protestant Switzerland were united in their opposition not only to papacy and to Rome's doctrine on religion and on the State, but also to the Habsburgs and their dominating position in Europe. The defeat of the Spanish Armada by Queen Elizabeth's subjects was a decisive victory for European and Swiss Protestants in their struggle against the counter-reformation. A less known figure, Heinrich Bullinger from Bremgarten, canton of Aargau, a gentle humanist and warm admirer of Zwingli, maintained a considerable correspondence with the supporters of the Reformed faith in England and did much to receive the Marian exiles in Zürich. The National Museum in Zürich even has a beaker which Queen Elizabeth gave him as a token of gratitude for what he had done during that period.

In the days of the Puritan Commonwealth, the Grisons clergyman John Batist Stuppa, rose to a position of great influence with the Lord Protector Cromwell, who consulted him in continental matters and in particular confined him his plans regarding the common policy of the protestant powers.

In the seventeenth century, England turned to the Confederation in different circumstances. As war broke out on sea between England and the Netherlands, the Protestant cantons sent a delegation to mediate between the two warring Protestant parties. In the ensuing peace treaty, the Protestant cantons were designated as arbitrators in all disputes which could not be settled by the two maritime powers. How strange that two seafaring nations should turn to landlocked cantons as mediators! The English Parliament sent a message of thanks to Protestant Switzerland written in Latin by the poet John Milton and expressing appreciation for their assistance.

During that same century Switzerland enjoyed the friendship of Louis XIVth until the growth of his power began to cast its shadow over Europe. His influence became so great in the cantons of the Swiss Confederation that it dominated everything else. Without French salt, corn, iron and silk, without subsidies from Versailles, without unimpeded access to French markets and without service in the French armed forces, seventeenth-century Switzerland would have found life unbearably hard. She would not have been able to remain independent and

neutral had not France's influence been balanced by Austria, Spain and the Netherlands and of course, England. She began to turn an attentive ear to William of Orange's ideas on the balance of power. English political thought found a striking response in Switzerland.

At the same time, the last part of the century was overshadowed by the rivalry between England and France. England fought to defend her beliefs, her monarchy, her economy, her colonies, and her newly acquired world power. She could only maintain her independence by preventing the ascendancy in Europe of any power which could forbid access to the continent. The much-coined phrase "Balance of power in Europe" meant in actual fact more than just that. It was for England a matter of life and death. She could not afford to have a Power aiming at hegemony facing from across the Channel. Thus, the interests of England and Switzerland coincided once more. But just as the Confederation had been divided in the previous century between Catholics and Protestants, so they split between friends of the French or friends of the English. During the war of the Spanish Succession, Berne celebrated the exploits of Marlborough with as much jubilation as if they had been her own.

• *To be continued.*

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