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PROFILE OF A WORKING MAN

It is probably true to say that the "victim" of this profile, although fiercely Swiss, is better known in London's financial circles, the Stock Exchange and in the construction industry than he is by the majority of Swiss in Britain. This we now intend to rectify.

But Swiss he is and, having kindly consented to devote some of his valuable time to your editor let us waste no more time before introducing Mr. William A. de Vigier, Chairman of one of Britain's most successful companies, Acrow Ltd.

Mr. de Vigier, Bill to his friends, was born in his Canton of origin, Solothurn on 22nd March, 1912. After school he successfully completed his apprenticeship with Scintilla Magneto Company in Solothurn, gaining an engineering and technical background that was to help motivate this extraordinary man for the rest of his phenomenal career.

Immediately afterwards, in 1935, he came to Britain because, as he put it, "I saw greater opportunity here than in Switzerland — in fact I still believe this to be true if one is prepared to work hard".

How prophetic this belief turned out to be! True, Bill de Vigier does work hard, probably much harder than most ordinary men would dream possible but that hard work has produced a world-spanning business with a turnover in 1976 of over £104,000,000 and pre-tax profits of over £8,000,000.

Quite an achievement when it is remembered that Mr. de Vigier started a small engineering business in a London railway arch with just £150. That kind of growth in just 40 years is nothing if not unusual.

In 1976 group exports totalled over £57,000,000, an achievement for which Acrow received a Queen's Award. Mr. de Vigier described this honour as "a particularly gratifying recognition of the success of the world-wide operations of the U.K. group and a tribute to the competence and enthusiasm of our team".

Bill de Vigier's hopes were initially all pinned on an adjustable steel prop he brought with him from Switzerland, a product unknown in the United Kingdom at that time. That prop was to revolutionise the construction industry in this country!

Today his "empire" has progressed far beyond that humble prop although it is still the product with which the name Acrow is most readily identifiable.

But Acrow today is a company, or better put, a group of companies, still led by Mr. de Vigier which spans every continent in the western world. It includes household names like Coles Cranes, Priestman Brothers, Crawley Refrigeration and Thos. Storey (Engineers) Ltd. to name but a few. The group employs some 11,000 people.

So we have had a brief look at part of Mr. de Vigier's meteoric career but that does not go far enough to introducing him as a man.

Bill de Vigier met his English wife

(née Betty Kendall) in London. They have two daughters, both of whom are now married.

His work philosophy is basically a simple one — he likes to be regarded as a fellow worker, which he undoubtedly is. His private philosophy differs little — he enjoys a challenge and if there is anything that irks this generally amiable man it is indecision. He also abhors waste in any form — in manpower, materials or resources.

He believes that a successful business can only be created by having the right team. To this end he takes great pains when recruiting senior staff to ensure that he has the right man.

He may ask the candidate to attend as many as three interviews — one short one to assess whether his metabolism suits the organisation and a second to assess his technical competence in whatever is his sphere of activity. If the appointment is an overseas one he will also interview the candidate's wife. In short, he takes a lot of trouble to collect his team so that it stays together. His method works. He is justifiably proud of the fact that he has never lost a senior man through "poaching" by a rival and Acrow's achievements speak for themselves.

So Bill de Vigier keeps himself busy with his own business affairs. But that's not good enough for this man, possessed as he is with what seems to be boundless energy. He is also a director of British Airways, one of the very few foreigners ever to serve on the board of a nationalised industry in this country.

He welcomes this additional task because it offers him a chance to see how the world's biggest and most successful

international airline works. Moreover, it gives him an insight into the workings of a nationalised industry, something which he regards as particularly interesting.

But even that is not enough. Mr. de Vigier is a director of some 40 companies. So how does he find the time to do all he does? He replies quite characteristically, "I have plenty of time — it is purely a matter of organisation and delegation."

He is an optimist, a quality without which he surely could not have achieved what he has — a pessimist just wouldn't have taken the risks.

Not only is he an optimist professionally he also sees a bright future for Britain. We mentioned earlier that he still believes Britain offers a good future for an entrepreneur. He also "swims against the tide" of general opinion. He is convinced that Britain's labour force is one of the best available anywhere so long as it is firmly and fairly led. Incentives are important here, he believes.

Whilst admitting a liking for the theatre and music Bill prefers to devote what little spare time he has (how on earth does he find any at all?) to keeping fit. At 65 he is still a force to be reckoned with on the ski slopes, in a tennis court or a swimming pool.

I concluded my interview with Bill de Vigier by asking him for a message for *Swiss Observer* readers. He kindly gave us one. It runs — "I am proud, very proud, to be Swiss" (he is an active member of the Swiss Mercantile Society and the Helvetica Lodge) "but I am also most grateful for the great opportunity and welcome offered to me by my host country, Britain".

May we, in thanking Bill de Vigier for talking to us, wish him continued good health. This is the only blessing we could wish for a man who does not work to live — he lives to work. Long may he continue to do so.

W.G.S.



Mr William A. de Vigier — the hard-working man who is profiled in these columns.