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Disappearing dust – one more Bourbaki Army mystery!

SOME very interesting comments regarding the Panorama depicting the surrender of the Bourbaki Army in February 1871 have been sent in by Mr and Mrs Paul Bessire.

Their answer to the article which appeared in the March issue, was as follows: "Your description may be the one now being taught at school but the official facts are somewhat different.

"On January 28 1871, an armistice was signed by Jules Favre (1809-1880) as member of the "Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale" 1870/71.

"In that document he forgot to mention that the "Armée de L'Est", and the Prussians carried on the war and pushed the army of Charles Bourbaki against the Swiss frontier.

"Poor old Jules Favre was not allowed to take part in the "Conférence Internationale de Londres".

Mr Bessire mentioned two other facts about that war: "Sedan" army of Napoleon III capitulated with full military honours on September 1 1870. Cavalry charge of Reichshoffen: August 6 1870.

"To cover up the retreat of MacMahon's army, thousands of mounted cuirassiers were given a wrong direction and landed in a vast hop field to be massacred by the Prussians".

Both Mr and Mrs Bessire recall visits to the Panorama. Mr Bessire went there in about 1910 – it was then called the "Diorama". He was very impressed by the stacks of rifles covered in dust.

In 1952 he visited Lucerne and

the Panorama again and was quite disappointed that the dust had been removed!

Mrs Bessire brought back a souvenir from a visit to the "Grand Panorama at the Loewenplatz", a print and text in English giving information on the "masterpiece of the celebrated artist Castres of Geneva, Jury member of the Paris Salon, assisted by the famous Swiss artists Hodler, Dufaux, Silvestre, Hébert, G. de Beaumont van Muiden".

The informative text mentions that the Swiss had done everything in their power for the sake of charity, and the artist wished to draw special attention to this fact.

Mrs Bessire has a distant connection with the Franco-Prussian war. Her maternal grandfather was an artillery captain serving on the northern front.

Having gone through the Institute of Technology and made a special study of railways then in their infancy, he was able to entrain under the nose of the Prussians several complete batteries with ammunition.

He received the highest decorations for this feat. Mrs Bessire's brother has the medals.

Captain Ulliac built several lines in the Jura and had a brilliant career as a railway engineer.

In due course he was offered the organisation of the Neuchâtel division. But before accepting, he had to change his nationality – "il faut que je me 'suisside'", he said. He died in Neuchâtel on March 14 1909.

We thank Mr and Mrs Bessire for letting us know these interesting facts.

Mariann Meier

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