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SWISS IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by

Béat de Fischer

(Former Ambassador to the Court of St. James's.)

(Continued.)

One might also recall here the presence of numerous and remarkable Huguenots from France, who had found refuge in London after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and who readily regarded the Genevans and the Protestant Swiss as members of their own great family. Such was, for instance, the case with Sir Samuel Romilly, M.P.; Samuel Bosanquet, a Governor of the Bank of England; and John Francis Rigaud, a painter and Member of the Royal Academy. They were all very close to Geneva by virtue of their marriages, their visits to that city, their studies or their business life.

But the decisive factor in the extraordinary efflorescence of the Swiss in England in the eighteenth century was certainly that that period was intellectually one of the most brilliant both in the Old Confederation and in Geneva, and that our country, too small to utilise the talents of all its children, had to let a surprising number of distinguished citizens go abroad — men eminent not only in literature, the sciences and the arts, but also in such fields as the army, the administration and banking. But one must also remember here the part played by Huguenot families who, having sought refuge in Geneva or in Switzerland for religious reasons, saw, after staying for various lengths of time, some of their members leaving again for different countries, where they were welcomed as Swiss.

Here, then, are sufficient factors to explain the remarkable influx of Swiss into Great Britain in the eighteenth century, and the part they were able to play there, thanks to the active sympathy and goodwill with which they met.

I

The series of literary, scientific and philosophical journeys which Genevans and Swiss undertook to the British Isles in the eighteenth century began in 1701 with the little-known one made by the Genevan Georges-Louis Le Sage (1676-1759), the teacher of a considerable number of young Englishmen. As a result, he wrote his *Remarks about England*. But it was the *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français*, the fruit of an earlier pilgrimage to England (1694-1695) by the Bernese officer of a Swiss regiment in Paris, Béat de Muralt (1665-1749), which unleashed the Anglomania of the Swiss when the book appeared in Geneva in 1725. (It is not certain whether Voltaire did read the 'Letters' on the occasion of his visit to England; he never mentioned them in his correspondence; the 1753 edition of the book was, however, found in his library.) In his turn, Albert de Haller (1708-77), who much enjoyed the works of Milton and Pope, came to London and to Oxford at a very early age. Later on he was to dedicate to George III his book *Arthur, King of England*, in which he declares himself in favour of a constitutional state modelled on England; he was hoping to get some reward for his efforts, but his book did not evoke quite the desired response. Charles-Victor de Bonstetten (1745-1832), of Berne, was in England in 1769-70, at the age of 24, and met many celebrities there. He visited London, Oxford,

Bath and Berkshire. He had the privilege of being introduced to Thomas Gray at Pembroke College and immediately a deep friendship united the great poet of nature with the young son of the Alps.¹¹ Johann Gaspar Scheuchzer,¹² son of Johann Jakob, came to England in 1720, at the age of 18, worked as librarian to Sir Hans Sloane and helped him to compile the catalogue of his collection of books, which was to become the Library of the British Museum. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Society.

Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) attended Edinburgh University from July 1783 to April 1785, and it was there that he entered upon 'the happiest year' of his life. There, too, he learnt, so his biographer says,¹³ always to take work seriously. The town which he described later at the beginning of *Adolphe* undoubtedly has some features of Edinburgh.

Etienne Dumont (1759-1829), of Geneva, stayed in England from 1786 to 1789 and again from 1791 to 1814.¹⁴ Former tutor to Lord Shelburn's children, and his librarian, he became an intimate friend of Jeremy Bentham, whose great treatises on punishments and rewards, on political economy and on judicial evidence he published; but for him, these unique works might never really have become known.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹⁵ (1712-78), tired of the persecutions he suffered in France, Geneva and the Canton of Berne as a result of his writings, sought asylum in England and hoped to find peace in this oasis of freedom in Europe. At the prompting of Milord Maréchal, George Keith, and in the company of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who wanted to 'show the lion' in London, he landed in Dover in January 1766. From the moment he arrived in the capital, everyone from commoner to King was interested in him. His *Le Devin du village* was staged at Covent Garden. The painter Allan Ramsay¹⁶ and the sculptor Gosset immortalised his features. The King himself secretly offered him a pension. But the malicious *Lettre du roi de Prusse*, which also circulated in London, upset him and gave him the idea that his enemies were poisoning public opinion. After toying with the idea of going to 'Wild Wales', of which he had been told that it resembled Switzerland, he accepted the hospitality of Richard Davenport in his house (since pulled down) at Wootton, in Staffordshire. However, he soon fell out with Hume — it was the famous 'quarrel' — and, after a stay in England of only 16 months, he returned to the Continent in April 1767. Nevertheless, his influence continued to be felt strongly on this side of the Channel: Priestley and Godwin supported his ideas; Goldsmith, Byron and Shelley were to be influenced by his cult of feeling.

Madame de Staël¹⁷ came to England in 1793, not as a refugee but to rejoin her lover, the Count of Narbonne, for whom she had rented Juniper Hall, in Surrey. But she was soon thought to be something of a Jacobin, and when the Anglo-French war broke out she returned to Switzerland. She had arrived at Juniper Hall at the same time as the news of Louis XVI's death, which made still sadder the exile of the friends whom she met again there: Talleyrand, Montmorency and Jaucourt. But she spent there with Narbonne 'quatre mois de bonheur échappés au naufrage de la vie', and is supposed to have written at that time the second chapter of *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, entitled 'Est-ce là du bonheur?' She also met Fanny Burney, with whom she felt herself in sympathy and whom she later called 'la première femme d'Angleterre'.

It is worth while adding here that Mademoiselle Necker had already visited England with her parents¹⁸ at the age of 10, in 1776.¹⁹ She was then much impressed by the acting of Garrick at Drury Lane; she later considered him and Talma to be 'les premiers génies du théâtre'. When she was 17, her mother, who was very eager for a Protestant marriage, planned to wed her, the wealthiest Protestant heiress in Europe, to the young but already famous William Pitt, whom she met at Fontainebleau. Nothing came of this, however, since Germaine could not resign herself to living permanently in England away from her father. Mr. Pitt, she said 'à le nez trop long et je n'aime pas les brumes de Londres.' (*To be continued.*)

¹¹ Marie-L. Herking, *Charles-Victor de Bonstetten* (Lausanne 1921).

¹² Gavin de Beer, 'Johann Gaspar Scheuchzer', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* (1949), ix. 56.

¹³ Gustave Rudler, *La Jeunesse de Benjamin Constant 1767-1794* (Paris 1909).

¹⁴ Jean Martin, *Etienne Dumont* (Neuchâtel 1942).

¹⁵ Louis John Courtois, *Le Séjour de Rousseau en Angleterre* (Lausanne 1911). Gavin de Beer, 'Quelques considérations sur le séjour de Rousseau en Angleterre', *Geneva, n.s.* (Genève 1955), iii. 1. Henri Roddier, *J.-J. Rousseau en Angleterre au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris 1950). Jacques Voisine, *J.-J. Rousseau en Angleterre à l'époque romantique* (Paris 1956).

¹⁶ A copy of Ramsay's portrait of Rousseau was ordered from the artist by Madame Necker who educated her daughter according to the ideas of the philosopher. It now adorns the Château de Coppet.

¹⁷ J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (London 1959), pp. 116-123.

¹⁸ The reader may be interested to know that the Neckers adopted the coat of arms of a Necker who lived according to genealogists in Ireland in the days of William the Conqueror.

¹⁹ Comtesse Jean de Pange, *Le Mystérieux Voyage de Necker en Angleterre* (1776) (Paris 1948).

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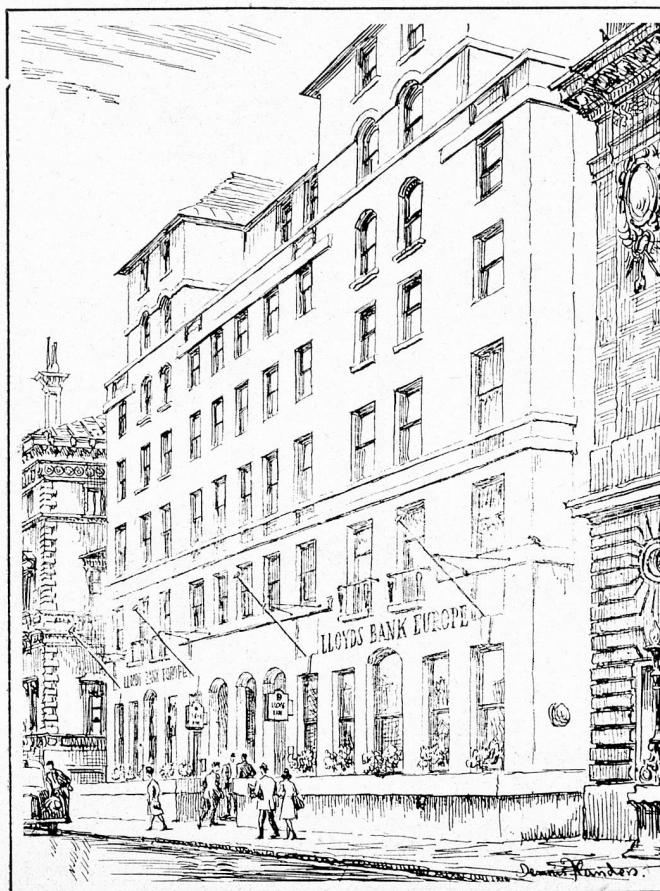
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