

150 years "Liberi e Svizzeri" or how the canton Ticino achieved its independence

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150 YEARS "LIBERI E SVIZZERI" or How the Canton Ticino Achieved its Independence.

(Extracts from an address given by Mr. J. Eusebio to the members of the Unione Ticinese.)

The Feudal System.

To-day we are here to celebrate freedom. It is not many days since it was said in the House of Commons that "the flame of freedom had once again been snuffed out in Europe."

We generally say we are free when we mean that we can do just what we like, that we have no duties to perform. Political freedom is much the same thing. It is taken to mean that a country or a community is free to do what it likes, to rule itself as and how it likes, that it owes no allegiance to any despotic ruler or to any other nation.

The young ones amongst you may feel inclined to ask: "But is not Switzerland a free country?" — "Why has our home Canton enjoyed only 150 years of self rule?" — Well, I shall make it my task this afternoon to give answers to these two questions, as briefly as possible and I hope you will bear with me for a short while.

During the Middle Ages the common man was tied to the land, under the feudal system; he was the servant of the glebe, agriculture being at that time the general occupation. The villein, as he was called, tilled the land on which he had been born for his lord, to whom he had to give up a portion of the produce, generally a tenth, and who had the right of life or death over him. Besides this, the villein was called upon to do specific work for his overlord, either "week work," that is labour for certain days a week regularly all the year round, or "boon work," extra labour when there was special need for it such as during harvest time. The land then was owned by large proprietors with wide farms (latifundia) tilled by this slave labour. There were, it is true, so called "free-men," but these were few, having acquired their tenure through performing military or other special service for their lord. There was also another way of escaping the land, through the priesthood, as the Church itself was one of the largest landowners.

The Swiss Become Free.

As a system feudalism, which obtained over Western Europe in mediæval times — in Great Britain no less than on the Italian Peninsula — was better suited to fertile, flat-lying country. In mountainous regions, such as Switzerland, where Nature is at once majestic and niggardly, and the life for human existence correspondingly hard, it could work but imperfectly. The hardy Swiss, on either side of the Alps resented it. It was not long before on the North side, the Swiss broke free from the rule of the Emperor, Albert I, of Austria, the cruel Habsburg who had feudal rights over most of the territory of the three original Cantons, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, and banished his oppressive agents. Thus it has been said, that the Swiss by their emancipation gained the first triumph for the democratic principles in Europe over an area larger than the city state. Few historical events have been more beneficial than the establishment of Swiss freedom by the valour and energy of a subject race, they helped to restore to the Continent of Europe the ideal of political liberty.



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The Eight Southern Bailiwicks of the Twelve Cantons.

About the same time, the end of the thirteenth Century, similar events on the South side of the Alpine range, our own side, occurred, but these were less successful. The Valle Leventina had just been ceded by their overlord, the Chapter of the Cathedral at Milan to Duke Ottone Visconti, when the "leventinesi" revolted in the year 1290 under Alberto Cerro of Airolo. They were subdued, however, by the soldiery despatched from Milan by the Duke. Two years later, the township of Biasca revolts and obtains from their "podestà" a Charter of Liberty. But then we must not forget the glorious episode of 1182, over a century before the Grütli plot, the destruction by the united efforts of the men of Leventina and Blenio of the bailiff's residence at Curterio in Blenio, and the solemn oath they subsequently took at Torre, pledging themselves mutual aid to prevent any other bailiff or despot from setting himself up over them. But fate had dark days in store for these intrepid mountaineers. The young and ambitious Swiss Confederation soon discovered that their prowess at arms could gain them further advantages than just war. The St. Gotthard and the Lucomagno Passes were important North South routes through the Alps, much used by the traders of the thriving commercial centres of the Italian Republics and the Hansa towns in Germany. To control these Passes, therefore, meant economic and, in case of war, strategic advantage.

Lucerne, and also Schwyz made several abortive attempts at gaining these routes for themselves. The various disputes culminated in open warfare. The Swiss met the army of the Duke of Milan at Arbedo, near Bellinzona, on the 20th June, 1422, and were soundly defeated. The Canton of Uri, however, were eventually granted sovereignty rights over the valley of Leventina in the year 1477. The duke of Milan soon regretted this and a year later claimed restitution, offering rather generously to refund the money previously paid to him, but the Canton of Uri refused and, backed by the local population, defeated the Duke's army at Giornico on 28th December, 1478. The ensuing peace treaty reaffirmed Swiss rights over Leventina, but returned to Milan the Valleys of Blenio and Riviera, which had been occupied meanwhile by the Swiss.

Further territory of what is the present day Canton of Ticino was acquired by other Swiss Cantons, mostly as payment for the supplying of soldiers to the various warring dukes and vassals of Northern Italy and France, the one exception being the city of Bellinzona, which on the 14th April, 1500, gave itself voluntarily into the protection of the Swiss Cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, rather than fall under the domination of the French, who had just defeated the Milanese Duke, Lodovico il Moro.

Thus, by the year 1527, most of the Canton Ticino was under Swiss rule, and constituted the eight bailiwicks of the Swiss Lords. These bailiwicks, which corresponded roughly to the present "Distretti," were administered by the respective Cantons through "Landvogts" or bailiffs, who in their turn appointed local "con-giudici," in the sub-districts, to assist them in the administration of justice. Every two years or so the Swiss Diet or Parliament would send into the Bailiwicks, including the Ticino, specially appointed Ambassadors whose duty it was to report on conditions.

Opinions still differ regarding conditions in the Ticino during this period of Swiss domination lasting

over two and-a-half centuries. There is no doubt that our people at first welcomed the protection of their powerful Swiss neighbours and the confederate Cantons in their turn did not at the time intend their rule to be more than a benign protectorate to keep clear so to speak their lines of communication with the trading centres of Northern Italy.

The "Balivi" (Bailiffs).

In my school days we were taught that the "balivi" had been cruel and corrupt. Well a Northerner is always cruel in the eyes of a Southerner. As for corruption the charge has its origin in the fact that the office of bailiff was bought, but such was the custom at this time. It is beyond question, however, that the majority of these men, sent to govern the Ticino were honest and as fair in the administration of justice as one can be in a Country speaking a language, and with customs, different from their own. Yet we have the severe judgment of Dr. Otto Weiss in his book entitled: "The Ticinese Bailiwicks of the XII Cantons in the 18th Century" published in 1914 (Die tessinischen Landvogteien der XII Orte im 18. Jahrhundert). "The Law was flouted, it being applied with extreme harshness towards the poor, and with lenience to the rich." The popular notion had it that justice was the only prosperous trade in the Ticino at that time. And no wonder, when one considers that the bailiff for Lugano had a stipend of 847 Milan lire, that for Locarno 230, and the unfortunate gentlemen appointed to govern the Vallemaggia a meagre 192. But it was not only the bailiffs who waxed fat at the expense of the people, but also, the numerous "ticinese" lawyers, for whom the legal system provided no end of oppor-

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tunity for enrichment. Namely from the bailiff's decision appeal could be made to the Ambassadors, from the Ambassadors to the Government of the Sovereign Canton, and from there to the Federal Diet.

Rough Justice.


As time went on all manner of corrupt practices came to light and it is not a matter for surprise, therefore, that in such conditions the bloody incident to which I have already referred at the beginning came to pass. This is what happened. The Landsgemeinde of Uri, in all good faith and with the best of intentions, entrusted their Government to bring in measures in Leventina to prevent the exploitation of widows and children which was going on there and which had been reported upon by the Federal Ambassadors. Some of the persons against whom these measures were directed began a campaign to persuade our proud but somewhat gullible Leventinesi that their rights were being infringed and that they should demand from their masters of Uri the right to administer criminal justice and levy tolls. This campaign succeeded. The villagers rose to demand their rights from the small Canton of Uri, but unfortunately for them they had overlooked that in a case such as this, by virtue of the Federal fact, Uri could call upon the assistance of other Swiss Cantons upon feeling threatened. Lucerne and Unterwalden marched with Uri into Leventina and the Leventinesi had to bow before superior force. The "putsch" was over, and the leaders prisoners. What

followed is one of the worst episodes in Swiss history. It took place on the 2nd June, 1755. This is how Stefano Franscini, our first Federal Councillor, describes the scene on the Piazza at Faido: "Thereupon the offended Sovereign (the Canton of Uri) gave vent to its cold and ferocious wrath. The people of Leventina were summoned to Faido, the valley's meeting place, and there was no evading this summons. Nearly 3,000 men gathered full of anxiety and foreboding. The confederate army encircled a harmless, silent and dejected multitude. The leventinese people had to swear renewed obedience to Uri and that they surrendered unconditionally. They further had to watch bareheaded and on their bended knees the carrying out of the capital sentence, by the sword, upon their principal magistrates and leaders: the ensign Forni, Councillor Sartori, and Captain Orso. The following day the soldiers retraced their steps over the St. Gotthard, taking with them in chains further eight of the condemned seditionists. These were publicly executed at Altdorf, the capital of Uri." The leventinesi moreover lost all their old franchises including the right to carry arms. Thus acted one of the Sovereign States of Switzerland towards the people it was wont to call its "dear and faithful compatriots." Nevertheless, it is gratifying to note that in over 250 years this was the only drastic occurrence of its kind — there had been minor disturbances in the Vallemaggia in 1577, Leventina in 1646, and in Blenio and Lugano in 1749, but in nearly every case with the limited object of stopping encroachments on the powers of the "congiudici," the local magistrates.

The French Revolution.

Now you will have noticed the date of these events at Faido, A.D. 1755 — we are only 18 years from the Boston Tea Party, and the victorious war of Independence of the American Colonists against Great Britain. It was important for the coming age that in an empty continent, offering boundless opportunities for innovations and enterprise, a new gospel of liberty and equality had been proclaimed as the slogan of a triumphant republic. The American declaration of Rights gave the cue to every friend of liberty in the old world. What the Americans had made themselves by revolution, the Europeans might become by a similar exercise of daring.

And soon the 14th July, 1789, saw, with the fall of the Bastille in Paris, the outbreak of the French Revolution. One thought flew through France whispering its siren music in every heart. The people were sovereign. Frenchmen were no longer, and had never been, subjects. They were citizens, members of a free and equal confraternity, with the right to make peace and war, to conclude treaties, to administer justice, to regulate Church, Army and Navy, to draft laws and impose taxes. No power could obstruct, none defeat the general will expressed by the National Assembly, its lawful organ. The "esprit de corps" of particular groups, whether provinces or municipalities, social classes or professions, trade guilds or corporations, must give way before the dictates of indivisible France. The charcoal burner at his furnace, the blacksmith at his forge, the farmhand following the plough, awoke to find himself part of sovereign France, as good a man as his lord, and endowed with impregnable rights, the right to be free, the right to own property, the right to speak his mind and to resist oppression. Such was the logic, such the sentiment, which captured



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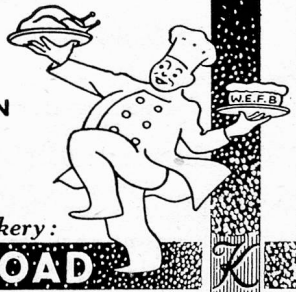
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France in the summer of 1789, and such the appeal of the new democracy to the subject peoples of Europe. Enshrined in the large, untested phrases of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which was prefixed to the French Constitution of 1791, this philosophy travelled far and wide, lighting lamps of pride and aspiration in innumerable homes. I leave you to imagine, therefore, the impact of these new principles of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" on the thinking part of the Ticinese population, particularly those who still remembered the Faudo executions.

Napoleon's Italian Campaign.

The impression upon our ancestors must have been all the greater as at this very time into their valleys poured the news from Lombardy of the magnificent feats of arms of the young French General Napoleon, who was revealing his military genius to an astonished Europe. The Ticinesi must have thought that the new political faith could hardly be a sham if it inspired the French soldiers to such deeds of valour as defeating in quick succession five armies sent against them in Northern Italy by the Austrian Emperor.

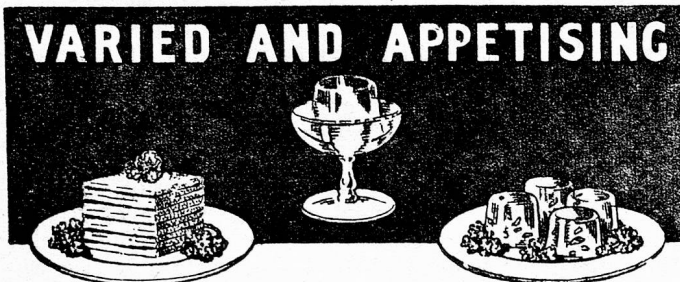
While Prussia had already withdrawn from the coalition against France, accepting peace terms at Bâle in 1794, the young Bonaparte now feeling his own position not altogether safe welcomed the truce proposed by the ever younger Austrian Emperor in April, 1797. This soon led up to the treaty of Campo Formio in October of the same year. By this treaty Francis of Austria renounced his claims to the Netherlands, which had already been occupied by the French, and recog-

nized the establishment of a free Italian state in the North of Italy under the title of Cisalpine Republic. This treaty is of further significance to us Swiss, because the Valtellina — that beautiful valley alongside the Lower Engadine — which up to that time had been a bailiwick of the Canton of the Three Gray Leagues (now known as the Grisons) was incorporated, at its own request, into the Cisalpine Republic, having been previously refused admission as the 4th League, on equal terms, by the 3 Leagues.

All this time in Switzerland the Twelve sovereign Cantons were keeping an uneasy vigil, fearing attacks from all sides; in the South, at Lugano, they stationed an army and recruited locally a Corps of Volunteers. At the same time politicians in the Ticino, who were out of favour with the existing regime and who styled themselves Patriots, were propagandizing in favour of the French freedom. Others had even taken refuge at Milan and were openly plotting, with the new Government there, for the annexation of the Canton Ticino to the Cisalpine Republic.

The Attack is Repulsed.

It was under the leadership of some of these Patriots that at Lugano, on the 15th February, 1798, two hours before dawn — I am quoting from the "Cronaca" left us by Antonio Maria Laghi, a Luganese business man — several platoons of Cisalpine soldiers landed on the beach at Cassarate. They marched into Lugano to attack and capture the Swiss Representatives at the Albergo Svizzero. They attacked first the Volunteer Guard quarters. There there was only a picket of six men, who immediately drummed out a call to arms, sounded the alarm while at once engaging the attackers with firearms. The sound of the tocsin, the drumming and the crackle of rifles woke the civilian population from their slumbers, but except for a handful of volunteers, nobody dared leave home. The battle



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lasted over an hour. There was one Swiss victim, Giovanni Taglioretti, who was killed by a rifle shot and his body robbed by the invaders. At last panic seized the Cisalpines who must have arrived before the appointed time as their fifth column, the Patriots inside Lugano, had not yet struck. So they took to their heels, and collecting their wounded jumped back into their boats making for the island of Campione, which was Cisalpine territory on the lake of Lugano. They left behind a quantity of rifles and two tricolour Cisalpine flags.

"Liberi E Svizzeri" At Last.

When the people recovered from their amazement, a crowd 3,000 strong collected on the Piazza, shouting such slogans as: "Liberi e Svizzeri" "Evviva la libertà." Members of the local "Consiglio di Reggenza" soon appeared and, on the insistence of the demonstrators, appointed on the spot two representatives to call on the Swiss Ambassadors at the Albergo Svizzero. Avv. Annibale Pellegrini and Angiolo Maria Stoppani were chosen for this momentous task and their instructions were briefly that they were not to take "no" for an answer. Avv. Pellegrini's words to the Swiss Representatives are recorded as follows: "Noi domandiamo i sacri diritti: vogliamo la libertà svizzera: alla fine, dopo secoli di sudditanza, siamo noi maturi per reggerci da noi stessi" (We demand our sacred rights: we want Swiss freedom: at last, after centuries of subjection, we consider ourselves mature for self rule). The Swiss ambassadors, however, would not commit themselves in any way, mentioning that their powers did not enable them either to grant or to refuse the demand made. But in the end they gave way, and their report drawn up the same day for the Federal Diet makes interesting reading: "This evening a great multitude of the people of Lugano came to us to demand Swiss freedom: having regard to the critical times and to encourage greater zeal for the defence of the fatherland, we informed them that this was not within our powers. But the people persisting energetically in their demand for liberty, we finally replied we could not refuse it."

The crowd continued their demonstration and upon hearing the result of the mission to the Ambassadors they set up "L'albero della libertà" (the tree of liberty) on which they had placed a mountaineer's hat to signify Tell's hat, as a token of their resolve to be free but to remain Swiss. The "Consiglio di Reggenza" thereupon issued their Freedom proclamation, to which

they had added a pardon for the Patriots, but the crowd would not approve of this and the pardon had to be withdrawn.

As news of events at Lugano reached Bellinzona on the 16th February, 1798, there was a similar demonstration but this time on the Liberty Tree they placed the scales to signify justice, instead of Tell's headgear. Similar demonstrations took place at Locarno and Mendrisio almost the same day.

I mentioned earlier on that Prussia had withdrawn from the first coalition against France by the treaty of Bâle. The city of Bâle had been the first sovereign Swiss Canton to overthrow the existing order and to establish friendly relations with the French Republic, one and indivisible. The city had been for some time the seat of the Helvetic Society, and one of the members of this Society, Peter Ochs now came to the Cantonal Government. His first act was to grant freedom to all the bailiwicks administered by his Canton. The message from the Bâle Government to Lugano renouncing their sovereign rights bears the date of the 13th February, 1798, that is, two days before the events I have just described to you. Thus both the demonstrators and the Swiss Representatives at Lugano on the 15th February were in ignorance of the fact that the freedom asked for had in fact already been granted. All honour therefore to the Canton and City of Bâle!

The Governments of the other Cantons quickly followed suit, but alas all too late. In the following year Switzerland was completely overrun by the various European armies. The Ticino itself witnessed a Russian army, under the great Suvoroff march through the length of its territory. It has not been recorded if the Russians had snow on their boots, but many are the stories that are still being told about them.

However this may be, the fact remains that our Canton had at long last gained the right to govern itself. When Switzerland was reconstituted under Napoleon's Act of Mediation in 1803, the Republic and Canton of Ticino entered the Confederation as one of its 19 independent states. Its freedom now unchallenged after years of subjection. When in 1848 Switzerland gave itself a Constitution and set up a central government, a Ticinese, Stefano Franscini, was elected a member of the first Federal Council.

The wisdom of the action taken at Lugano 150 years ago stands out to-day all the brighter, if only we consider the world conflagrations that have visited our own generation.

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