

As others see us

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AS OTHERS SEE US.*The Most Civilised People in Europe**by Hamilton Fyfe.**George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 3/6 nett.*

The sweeping assertion implied in the title of this book is to us Swiss a little embarrassing and a strain on our modesty. The title is not of the authors own coining; he is quoting an American diplomat, Norval Richardson, who, in a book called *Living Abroad*, wrote: "The longer I have lived in Switzerland, the more we felt that we were living in what is perhaps the most civilised country in the world." — Which does not lessen our confusion.

The publication of the book coincides, designedly, with the centenary of Switzerland's federal charter, the Constitution of 1848. To this wise and far-seeing instrument the author attributes much of our country's prosperity and the success of her democratic institutions. It is well to remember that only a year before this charter was adopted, our national unity was disrupted by the Sonderbund, a civil war had broken out and the very existence of Switzerland stood in jeopardy. The danger was averted and to-day the world beholds the miracle of a land happy and united, yet in which all the elements of discord are present. Racial and religious differences, the problems of four languages, and local jealousies beset it, but all are overcome by the practical common sense of an intelligent and democratic people.

Mr. Hamilton Fyfe is no superficial observer. His knowledge of Switzerland is not confined to Hotel-life and mountain scenery. He has delved below the surface and penetrated every layer of our social stratum, from Cabinet Ministers to farm labourers. The result is a most comprehensive over-all picture of the Swiss and their way of life.

Writing with sympathy and understanding, he runs through the whole gamut of our national institutions, the systems of local and federal governments, industry and agriculture, the army, Religion, Education and Art. Nothing is omitted, even the electoral intricacies of Proportional Representation are explained. One of the most absorbing chapters "The

Gentlemen at Berne" throws light on the working of the central government and discloses the interesting fact that the M.P. in session receives 40 francs a day but gets no pay if he does not attend.

The dominating feature of Swiss politics is government by the people. This is ensured by an elaborate system of checks and balances and no one in authority is allowed undue power. In this, he thinks, lies the explanation of the Swiss democracy being ahead of other civilised nations.

But the book is by no means an undiluted panegyric and the author is not blind to our shortcomings. He remarks on the disparity between the very rich and the ordinary people and deplores the hard lot of the peasant farmer, the lack of interest in public affairs by the younger generation and the persistence of much superstition. He finds that the Swiss are not, on the whole, a sober nation. His comment on our yodels, alphorn and cowbells, is that they are best heard from a distance. We can assure Mr. Hamilton Fyfe that the Scottish bagpipes have the same effect on us.

Considering the general accuracy and lucidity of Mr. Hamilton Fyfe's study, it is surprising that his reference to our vernacular is not clearer. In chapter II, page 11, he writes: "They speak German quietly, not, as most north-Germans speak it, in a barking aggressive tone." The inference is that the Swiss speak the same language as do the North-Germans, only softer. This is not the case, in fact nowhere in Switzerland is real German spoken: the idiom of the German-Swiss is a guttural dialect which varies from one district to another. Its root is Germanic but so remote is it from the German speech proper that most visitors, however fluent their German, will find it difficult to understand a word of it.

Here, then at the price of a packet of cigarettes, is a well-informed and instructive book which, in simple and straightforward language sketches almost every aspect of Swiss life. To the English public it offers an entertainingly written survey of the successful progress achieved by a small democracy, to us Swiss the stimulating sensation of seeing ourselves as others see us.

J.J.F.S.

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