

Switzerland and the English

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SWITZERLAND AND THE ENGLISH

Reviewing a newly-published interesting book. (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 15/-)

With humour and scholarly knowledge Arnold Lunn traces, in this book, the development of man's concept of the beautiful in relation to mountains, from the Greeks right up to modern times, and presents the reader with many a startling fact. Up to the end of the Middle Ages the Alps were barriers only and "places of torment". In the XVth century Conrad Gessner and his colleagues began, as the early prophets at home, to look at mountains in a different light. What they saw, and felt and said has been enriched and broadened by countless kindred spirits. Swiss and Englishmen share the honours of being counted among the early connoisseurs who through their appreciation of Alpine scenery have played a part in shaping the aesthetic values of the world today. Poets, painters, philosophers and sportsmen alike have helped to form a fellowship of veneration which cuts across all boundaries and will outlast the baser ties of racial enmity. Few factors have done more to spread the gospel of the hills the world over than that Victorian institution, the Alpine Club, and the fashion of English winter sports, which gave a magic connotation to such names as Parsenn and Mürren.

Not only the Alps, but other aspects of our country too, receive a share of Mr. Lunn's tribute. He writes:

"It is the fashion among the less discerning members of the intelligentsia to dismiss Switzerland as the Mecca of cheap trippers and hearty athletic skiers, but there are others who fully realise that no real understanding of the forces which have shaped our European destinies is possible without some knowledge of the great events which have taken place within the frontiers of the Swiss confederation.

Along the great roads of Rome which crossed the plains of Switzerland, the Caesars posted on their way from the Tiber to the distant Rhine. All types and conditions of men, Popes and Emperors and Generals, pilgrims and merchants, have struggled across the great Alpine passes. From a little castle in northern Switzerland a knight rode forth to claim the Imperial crown, and the descendants of that Habsburg at one time ruled over Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, and as the Consort of Queen Mary over England herself. In the little wooded pass of Morgarten near Lucerne that same royal house suffered a crushing and humiliating defeat, the first victory of a rude mountain democracy against feudal privilege. Within the frontiers of Switzerland battles were fought and issues debated that changed the face of Europe. Had not Burgundy been defeated near the waters of Neuchatel, there might today be a buffer kingdom between France and Germany. Had Calvin and Zwingli failed, the counter-reformation might have recovered for Rome her spiritual territories which were lost at the Reformation. Had Rousseau, born in Geneva, never existed, France might have escaped her revolution. There would seem to be some slight difference of opinion as to the benefits of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution but their decisive importance is not in dispute, and the little country which played so influential a part in their development cannot be dismissed as a mere "playground of Europe".

Let us hope that one day Mr. Lunn will follow his friend's advice and write, as was suggested to him, the book to be called "Switzerland without the Mountains". The author is eminently suited for this task, and would find a most appreciative public.

The present book contains seventeen plates, partly photographs and partly reproductions of paintings, which illustrate the author's thesis of Alpine aesthetic evolution. One cannot but regret that the exigencies of present-day conditions did not permit the reproduction in colour of such pictures as Ruskin's "Matterhorn" and "Lake Geneva", or Allinson's "The Unteraar Glacier", or "The Dent du Midi" by Rothenstein. An "Anthology" of Mountain paintings selected and compiled by the author would be of world-wide interest. His sense of beauty and his knowledge of mountains and mountaineering would guarantee a volume of unusual merit.