

Philip Guedalla and the Swiss

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PHILIP GUEDALLA AND THE SWISS.

To see ourselves as others see us is a stimulating and salutary experience even though (or rather, because) our complacency and our amour-propre may thereby receive a jolt.

Rummaging among old books, I have come across a volume of essays by Philip Guedalla, published some twenty years ago by Hodder & Stoughton under the title "Men of War." Guedalla was the historian par excellence of the nineteenth century and his books on Palmerston, The Duke (Wellington) and the Second Empire (Louis Napoleon) will ever rank as masterpieces of modern history. His genius lay in the ability to infuse life and humour in what might otherwise be a dry-as-dust accumulation of prosaic events. He was always unconventional, his writings were brilliant, well documented and scintillating with wit. He possessed the art of making history as entertaining and as breathlessly exciting as any thriller, and his writings might well be described as "History without tears." — His death (in 1945, I believe) deprived English Letters of one of its brightest lights.

The first of the collected essays above referred to is called "The Soldier" and deals with Switzerland. It pokes gentle fun at what the author affects to regard as the degenerate and servile descendants of a once mighty race of soldiers.

"Swiss history," he writes, "apart from the distinction of contributing Zwingli to the last page of every encyclopædia, wears singularly few honours in the European record and most of its prominent parts were played by foreigners. Napoleon crossing the Alps, Hannibal doing the same, Gibbon writing in Lausanne and Voltaire in Fernay, copy, even Baedeker was a German! He quotes Mr. Beerbohm as describing the Swiss as "a smug, tame, sly, dull, mercenary little race of men," and says that when Bernard Shaw wished to make the profession of arms ridiculous, he introduced a Swiss soldier.

He recalls the period when the Swiss soldiery were the masters of Continental battlefields. One half expects, he continues, to find them charging with the national cry of "coming, Sir" and one finds it difficult to peer back into a time when tall Switzers lounged in bright colours under the high arches of Renaissance doorways. There is no gleam of the old light, no echo of the heavy step of the Swiss infantry. We have instead the mild tap at the door, the cautious

tread, the bright deposited tray, of the kind familiar Swiss, that is the last that Europe sees of the pikemen of Marignano. One has the uneasy feeling that if an invading army passed the Swiss frontier, its luggage would be taken upstairs and the officers above the rank of major accommodated by a courteous management in rooms with a view of the glaciers."

The essay concludes with a vision of the last charge of the Swiss Guard in a long line of white shirt fronts.

Scathing? annoying? Certainly not. It is all so obviously a leg-pull with no malice in it that it would be foolish to do ought but enjoy the cleverness and the delightful irony of the satire.

If Guedalla thus laughs at the Swiss, he is by no means tender towards the failings of his own country. Listen to his comments on the modern Englishman: "An Englishman is a man who lives on an island in the North Sea governed by Scotsmen; that is why it is called self-governing. His occupations are simple but absorbing. In the intervals of earning money he practices (or preaches) the family virtues, and regards his weather, his relations and his Government with a settled disgust. As the result, possibly, of an indifferent climate, he is a person of somewhat slow perception To the Englishman his island is a piece of land entirely surrounded by foreigners, the majority of whom live in a continent known as Europe. Certain parts of it, as for example the Swiss mountains, the French Riviera and the Italian picture galleries, are reserved for the holidays of the Englishmen, but the remainder is entirely given up to foreigners. These foreigners, it has been observed by Englishmen who have ventured among them, differ in degree but not in kind. They are marked in every instance by an obstinate refusal to converse in English. This unreasonable objection compels the Englishman to toy lightly (and painfully) with the various absurd languages which they use among themselves . . . etc., etc. . . ."

To one who was broadminded enough thus to pillory his own countrymen, much can be forgiven. And those of us with Swiss blood in their veins who might be somewhat nettled, as I was at first, at a joke very much at their expense, would be well advised to summon to their aid such philosophy as they can muster: they will then discover, in pachydermatous comfort, that Guedalla's frolic is a source of amusement rather than one of resentment. —

J.J.F.S.

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