

The Heritage of Switzerland

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THE HERITAGE OF SWITZERLAND.

By ERIC GLASGOW, M.A.

Published in September issue of "Gibbons' Stamp Monthly."

It is hardly necessary to insist that the stamps of Switzerland have many merits from the collector's point of view, for they are in no danger of being ignored or underestimated, judging from my own limited experience. A compact and obvious group, whose appeal is many-sided as well as strong, they invite attention and quickly reward it.

For the philatelist proper the early issues offer a delightful variety of paper and perforation, together with a generous sprinkling of retouches, errors of colour, and "tête-bêche" pairs. Apart from the rare cantonal stamps, which can easily be left alone, and a few other items, none of them indispensable, the material is fairly plentiful and relatively inexpensive, and it includes quite a number of minor problems which the enthusiast for research could tackle with, I imagine, good hope of successful achievement.

It is a field which, in spite of its popularity, has not been exhausted, and given patience and detailed study it might well yield a rich harvest. At any rate, it contains ample philatelic complications to attract those who are interested in the scientific aspects of their hobby, even if they do not expect to make any very startling discoveries, and yet the beginner's path is not unduly beset by pitfalls in the shape of forgeries or reprints on a large scale. In general therefore, this country deserves a warm recommendation, and not only for philatelists of the most "highbrow" type.

As for the ordinary collector who does not profess to be a student, what more could he want but the long sequence of pictorials, well-designed and well-produced, which Switzerland has provided, especially in recent years? They cover a wide range of subjects, make a brilliant display in the album, and yet do not require more than a moderate expenditure of time and money.

Although Switzerland is small in comparison with the great Powers, and weak as regards its mineral wealth and industrial resources, it is too important to be forgotten and most of us know something about it, if only that it is a federal republic, noted for its scenery, its hospitality, its chocolate and its watches, whose capital is Berne. At first sight its endowments seem poor and its difficulties paralysing, but closer analysis soon reveals the source of its strength and the explanation of its survival. It is geography, above all, which has made Switzerland what it is. Its central position in Europe, its political neutrality preserved for several centuries, and its humanitarian activities, so evident and necessary in a stricken world, have combined to earn for it a reputation which cannot be disregarded, and which naturally tends to swell the size of its philatelic following.

Yet Switzerland is more than a name we encounter frequently in daily life, and more than a geographical expression, to be sought and located on the map; it is also a word which we immediately associate with freedom and peace, sunshine and snow, mountains and lakes, placid cows and memorable holidays. When we hear or read of it we may think of the mysterious grandeur of the mountains, dwarfing in their immensity

all that man has accomplished; the sparkle of the waterfalls in the radiance of the Alpine sky; the ever-changing rivers and the more ponderous movements of glaciers; the green valleys full of flowers and fertility, overshadowed by the hard unfeeling rocks challenging in their rugged endurance; the pretty villages and busy towns so ready to welcome strangers; the smiling faces and picturesque costumes of the peasants proud to be citizens of a democracy which has so successfully reconciled unity with diversity, liberty with order.

If we turn to the stamps we shall find that they are not unworthy of their origin. The glimpses they supply are small detached and selective; the views they offer are telescopic rather than panoramic. Nevertheless, they effectively awaken the imagination, and if carefully put together they can form a very valuable supplement to knowledge gained from books or travel.

A means by which we can bring into our homes, at little cost and on a miniature scale, realistic sketches of Lake Lugano and the Jungfrau, Lake Lucerne and the Mythen, St. Moritz and the Staubbach Falls, and many other features of the Swiss scene, is surely not to be despised, even by the most light-hearted of collectors.

Nor need our enjoyment be marred, as far as Switzerland is concerned, by the uncomfortable suspicion that what we collect so ardently are actually colourful labels, printed to exploit our purses rather than to fulfil a genuine postal or commemorative purpose, for although new issues are constantly being added, their numbers are not on the whole excessive and their object is usually a worthy one. Thus few are likely to quarrel with the long series of "Pro Juventute" stamps, which have appeared in regular annual instalments since 1913, almost without a break, partly because they are so attractive in themselves, but mainly because the premium is reasonable and devoted to a charity which we all want to help, especially at Christmas time. A more recent innovation is the "National Fête" stamps, but the beauty and interest of these disarm criticism; the set for 1949 consists of four superb examples of the artistic and technical standards which stamps can attain.

But we can see the history as well as the geography of Switzerland in the mirror of its stamps, and it would be a pity to neglect this because it is less obvious more fragmentary, and more difficult to interpret.

Switzerland did not spring fully grown out of the

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impenetrable fastness of the Alps, as in Greek mythology the goddess Athene sprang from the mind of Zeus. Its rise was slow and protracted rather than sudden and dramatic, and it did not even begin until fairly late. The territory it now comprises coincides very roughly with that occupied by the Helvetii in Roman times, and the name of the country as it is given in its stamps is an echo of that long-lost tribe.

New races and new conquerors swept into and over the unyielding highlands after the fall of Rome, and the Middle Ages were old before independence became even faintly visible. The place of Italy was taken by Germany, and Switzerland became part of that curious anachronism known as the "Holy Roman Empire." Even the unity which might have been derived from allegiance to a common ruler was largely denied, because the country was divided into many separate units, subject to different feudal lords. The most powerful of these was the Count of Habsburg, who from his castle on the banks of the Aar held sway over a large tract south of the Rhine; and it was against him that the Swiss struggle was at first mainly directed.

Few readers will need to be reminded of the legend of William Tell, for it has been much commemorated in the stamps of Switzerland, where we may find both a portrait and an action study, together with the famous crossbow, the boy and the pierced apple. Historians have a habit of treading heavily on such mythical heroes and their exploits, the evidence being usually thin and unreliable. In this case it is far from abundant, but the general verdict seems to be that the legend has some foundation and that it may well be true, in substance if not in detail.

Definite knowledge about Tell is lacking, but there is no reason to reject our impression of him as a typical inhabitant of the Alpine valleys, strong, resolute and impatient of restraint; and he probably lived in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Nor is it incredible that such a man should have offended the arrogance of Gessler, the Habsburg Governor of Uri, by refusing to bow to his hat mounted on a pole in the market-place of Altdorf, the cantonal capital. One can imagine the anger this defiance would arouse, the seizure of Tell, the Governor's hesitation as to how to

dispose of him until, hearing of his skill as a marksman, he maliciously offers to release him if he can hit an apple on his son's head. This delicate task Tell unexpectedly performs, and then reveals that he has a second arrow which he would have used to shoot Gessler if he had failed. He is, therefore, not released but instead is sent by boat up Lake Lucerne for safe keeping in the castle at Küssnacht. On the way there, however, a storm arises and Tell is able to escape, burning with a determination to seek vengeance for the wrongs he has suffered. His anger is inflammatory and has wider consequences than the assassination of a hated Governor; it also precipitates a rebellion against the Habsburgs and the beginning of the emancipation of Switzerland from the foreign yoke.

This tale is plausible enough and does not conflict with what we know to be historical facts. The spark which lit the flame of Swiss independence was struck, not in the central plateau so vulnerable to attack, but in the forest cantons, far up in the mountains, and of these Uri was prominent from the first. The tough farmers and herdsmen of this region were accustomed to freedom and not afraid of fighting for it, and their environment as well as their temperament gave their aspirations some chance of success. The relief map of the area surrounding Lake Lucerne, which forms the design of a stamp issued in 1941, helps to explain this and indicates where the first definite move was made. This occurred in August, 1291, when three cantons — Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden — fearful of Habsburg ambitions, established the "Everlasting League" for mutual aid, an event recalled by another stamp of 1941, which shows the "Oath of the Three Swiss," a symbolic monument from the Federal Palace at Berne.

There was then little assurance that the League would live up to its grandiose title, for it was a flimsy structure, a measure of co-operation reluctantly conceded in order to resist oppression, rather than a demand for independence and a unitary State. The League was a bargain between jealous communities, an alliance and not a federation. Nevertheless, it was not destined to perish, as so many such agreements have perished, in a welter of mutual distrust. This may have been because the danger was too serious, the

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pressure from outside too constant, to allow it to crumble; or because the persistent hostility of the Houses of Luxemburg and Wittelsbach towards the Habsburgs enabled it to consolidate and grow. At any rate, it succeeded in inflicting a severe defeat on the Habsburgs at Morgarten in 1315, and after that it did more than survive; it actually expanded, through the adherence of other Swiss cantons. The fourth of the forest cantons, Lucerne, joined in 1332. Zürich followed in 1351, Glarus and Zug in 1352, and Berne in 1353. Switzerland was being made, but the process was drawing it out of the mountains which had once been its stronghold and exposing it to fresh perils.

One of the "National Fête" stamps of 1940 commemorates the decisive battle of Sempach, which was fought in 1386 and which finally averted the threat from the Habsburgs. The victory of the Swiss, valuable as it was, was largely the result of the heroism of Arnold von Winkelried, who enabled his compatriots to win the day in spite of their inferior numbers by flinging himself upon the solid ranks of the enemy and so breaking up their formation. His bravery and self-sacrifice are still remembered with pride, and the memory is cherished by the Swiss hardly less than that of Tell himself. This triumph greatly increased both the power and the prestige of Switzerland, and enabled it to emerge as a factor of considerable weight even in European politics. It was no longer satisfied with self-defence, but was ready to interfere in the disputes of

its larger neighbours, and owing to the splendid fighting qualities of the infantry it could provide, it was by no means despicable as an ally.

Fishing in troubled waters rarely seems an admirable or high minded policy, and it can be justified, if at all, only on the ground that it was encouraged by the spirit of the age and is a peculiar temptation for a small State. The catch, however, was considerable, for the expansion of Switzerland was maintained. When Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was defeated and slain at Nancy in 1477, another mighty adversary was got rid of, and the Swiss only awaited an opportunity for breaking away from the Emperor in distant Vienna. This came in 1499, when an attempt to impose new taxes led to open war. Once again the valour of the Swiss soldiers carried all before them and a victory was won at Calven, which is illustrated by another of the "National Fête" stamps of 1940. By the Treaty of Basle, which ended the war, the independence of Switzerland was acknowledged, but a vague connection with the Empire remained until after the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), when the last feeble thread was formally severed. A stamp was issued in 1948 for the centenary of the Treaty of Westphalia, in which this was done.

Meanwhile, the State had been transformed by important internal changes and developments. Necessity and habit had drawn the cantons closer together, patriotism had become more national and less local, a common heritage had grown up which transcended petty rivalries and provided a firm bond of union. The Everlasting League had been adapted for a much more ambitious purpose than its initial one, and the State it had guided into existence had been called Switzerland, after Schwyz, the canton which had been in the vanguard of the drive for freedom.

A symbolic representation of the meeting of the first federal Parliament is the subject of a stamp issued in 1938, and this indicates that the framework of government had been tightened. Nevertheless, there were still difficulties, some of them new and powerful ones. The friction between the forest and plateau cantons, having its roots in geography, did not die, and it was aggravated by the advent of the Reformation, which split the country into Catholic and Protestant sections. Trouble at home was one of the reasons why Switzerland's military career came to an end soon after the battle of Marignano in 1515. In this battle, which is recalled by two stamps of 1941, the Swiss were defeated with heavy losses, and it was demonstrated that even their courage was no match for the latest devices in warfare. Ulrich Zwingli served there as a chaplain, but he undermined the policy of foreign engagements as much by spreading in Zürich his religious doctrines as by directly opposing the dissipation and waste which it entailed. Switzerland was given domestic problems, which consumed its limited strength.

Danger from outside again assailed Switzerland in 1798, when Napoleon invaded the country and converted it into the Helvetic Republic, a name which went so deeply into the past that it tacitly rejected the bulk of the Swiss heritage. His handiwork was, however, overthrown by the Vienna settlement in 1815, when Switzerland recovered its independence and reached its present frontiers, three extra cantons being added, making twenty-two in all. Three of these have since



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been sub-divided, so that the total number is now twenty-five, the arms of every one of which may be found among the "Pro Juventute" stamps.

It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that Switzerland began to assume its modern aspect. An unusually interesting set of stamps was issued in 1947 for the centenary of the first Swiss railway, which ran from Zürich to Baden, and Swiss communications were later improved by the construction of the great St. Gotthard tunnel, opened in 1882, thanks to the courage and ability of Louis Favre, whose portrait is depicted in a stamp of 1932.

In 1847, too, there was a serious crisis, caused by the discontent of the Catholic cantons, which formed the "Sonderbund" and threatened to disrupt the Confederation. This opposition was soon suppressed, however, the federal leader being General Henri Dufour, who is shown in a stamp of 1937, and after that a new constitution was instituted, giving the central government fuller powers and diminishing local autonomy. This is the constitution which, after modification in 1874, still operates to-day, and two stamps of 1948 commemorate its adoption. Postal arrangements may be taken as a good example of its effects, for these were among the functions then placed in federal hands, the cantons having previously supplied what they thought fit, and a few, such as Zürich, Geneva and Basle, having produced stamps of their own. The change was remembered a century later by the issue of three special stamps.

At first the Confederation confined itself to supervision, requiring the cantons to conform to general rules as to organization and charges, but in 1850 the whole system was unified by the provision of a set of stamps for sale and use throughout the country, superseding the old local issues. It was a definite sign that Switzerland had become a nation, and this impression was confirmed by the steady output which followed.

Among the many famous names associated with Switzerland, mention can be made of only a few. It was known, of course, to Gibbon and Wordsworth, Voltaire and Rousseau, Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant, and the Romantic movement early in the nineteenth century drew not a little sustenance from its towering peaks, so wild and elemental.

But Switzerland gains most credit from things calmer and more permanent than these. We honour it as the home of J. H. Pestalozzi, whose insight and philanthropic zeal were not wasted in education; of J. H. Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross, to which so many owed so much during the recent war; and of Jacob Burckhardt, whose work as a historian has thrown so much light on Italy in the Renaissance period. All these are shown in stamps, and others only less prominent.

Perhaps this account will enable collectors to see in the stamps of Switzerland more than they have hitherto seen. Finally, attention should be drawn to three valuable articles which have already appeared in *G.S.M.* — one by Frederick A. Smale on "The Christmas Stamps of Switzerland" in December 1938, dealing mainly with designs, another by Sylvia Landman on "The Middle Issues of Switzerland" in December 1943, which is more philatelic in treatment, and Mr. H. G. D. Gisburn's vivid "Philatelic Tour of Switzerland" in September 1949.

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