

A History of Switzerland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1952)**

Heft 1188

PDF erstellt am: **10.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692737>

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A HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND.

To many of our British friends the history of Switzerland is a closed book. Beyond a vague notion that an archer named William Tell was somehow involved they know little or nothing of it. Not that they subscribe to Henry Ford's fatuous remark "History is bunk", the reason is more likely just indifference and insularity, possibly also the absence of a modern historical work that might arouse their interest.

This deficiency has now been remedied. An attractive, well-written and competent History has made its appearance: "A SHORT HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND" by E. Bonjour, H. S. Offler and G. R. Potter, published by Geoffrey Cumberlege of Oxford University Press, London E.C.4, price 35/- net.

The work, though built up in three parts, is continuous. The first five chapters are written by H. S. Offler of the University of Durham, the next three by Professor G. R. Potter of the University of Sheffield, and the last four by Professor E. Bonjour of the University of Basel, an impressive triumvirate. Each of the collaborators is an authority on the period of which he writes, each displays scholarship and literary skill.

Mr. Offler's learned and stylish contribution covers, roughly, the period from the Roman occupation to the end of the fourteenth century. Switzerland, he points out, is a historical and not a natural creation. In Roman times after the defeat of the Helvetii at Bibracte, the amorphous geographical area that came to be the lands of the Swiss, had no well-defined frontiers and, but for political events, might, even in recent times, have extended into Germany and Italy.

The picture Mr. Offler draws of Roman life in the Swiss districts is fascinating. To the native barbarian population the civilizing influence of Roman culture was most beneficial; the introduction of the vine is but one of the many benefits it derived from the Roman occupation. After the collapse of the Roman empire in the fifth century A.D. the Swiss lands were overrun by the Burgundians and the Allemannians, and gradually assumed the racial and linguistic pattern they possessed when in 1291 the confederation was founded.

Conversion to Christianity, subjection to German Kings and their advocati (Voegte), the establishment of the monasteries, the rise of powerful families such as the Zaehringen, the Kiburg, and, above all, the

Habsburg, mark the transition to the middle ages. The Habsburgs, those able, acquisitive men whose prognathous features came to be seen on so many thrones in Europe, of whom the Bishop of Basel, in 1273, said "Lord God, sit tight in Heaven or this Rudolf will usurp your seat" were to become the common enemy of the Swiss. It was mainly against them that the 1291 pact of confederation was directed.

The success and the permanence of the confederation are one of the miracles of history. It must not, however, be assumed that it was a triumph of liberal or democratic principles as we understand them. Communal independence, not the freedom of the individual, was its object.

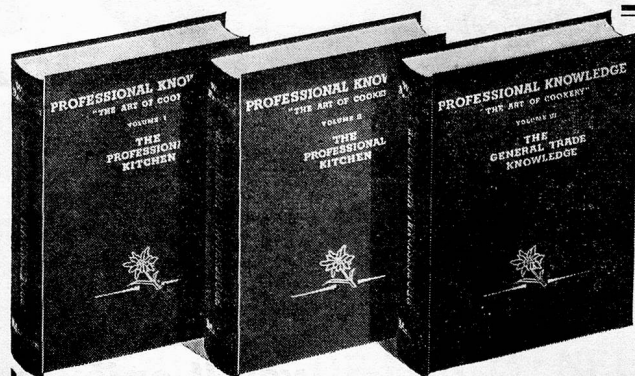
The fifteenth century was the heroic age of Swiss history. There was a moment when the united cantons were a great power, dreaded, if not respected, by the whole of Europe. But after the Burgundian wars had been fought and won and the Swiss were no longer under the great unifying influence of an external enemy, a decline set in. Then came the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, when politics could not be separated from religion and civil war disrupted the land. This period and the succeeding span from the peace of Westphalia to the French Revolution is very ably dealt with by Professor Potter.

The influence of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic interlude, the foundation of the Federal State, the revised constitution, the impact of the two world wars the continued progress of the Swiss people in economic, artistic and cultural matters as well as in political history are the subjects of Professor Bonjour's study, compactly and lucidly handled.

The title of the work is "A short history". The word "short" is a relative term, we should have thought "Concise" to be more appropriate. We also should have liked to see better, preferably coloured maps, and the alphabetical index supplemented by a classified or chronological index. Marginal headings or dates would have been useful and allowed easy reference.

As a historical study, the work is of outstanding merit; the triumvirate responsible for it have performed their task brilliantly. We only hope that the price will not prove a deterrent to a wide circulation. For it brings to life, presented with objectivity, clarity of treatment and erudition, the great past of what we, in all modesty, would describe as a remarkable land and a remarkable people.

J.J.F.S.



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