

A dubious welcome for Switzerland's first tourists

Autor(en): [s.n.]

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - (1962)

Heft 1408

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690440>

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A Dubious Welcome for Switzerland's First Tourists

After the Valais had figured prominently in Rousseau's famous novel "La Nouvelle Héloïse", everybody rushed to visit it. The following amusing story is told of the arrival of some of these early tourists in Switzerland. In 1765 the botanist Thomas was touring the Valais. The first time he and his companions set foot in Zermatt, "the population was alarmed", he wrote, "to see these strangers armed with knives and picks and carrying enormous boxes of a kind never before seen in those parts. The people clustered together in groups and there were whispered consultations; everyone voiced his thoughts and suspicions to his neighbour with the result that all Zermatt became convinced these strangers were spies who had come to reconnoitre the valley passes with the obvious intention of making off that way on their return after stealing the sheep from the mountain pastures. Straight away the crowd swarmed to the vicarage, the only house in the village at that time where accommodation was available, and called upon the incumbent to deliver up his guests because they were spies."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's walking stick: a memorable sale in the 13th year.

We read in the "Gazette de France" of 8 Thermidor of the year 13 that excitement ran high when Rousseau's walking-stick was sold in the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin. It was bought by an Austrian admirer who had made the journey from Vienna specially to acquire the precious relic. The "Gazette de France" wrote: "After obtaining the stick for its weight in gold this Viennese went into raptures: 'Behold his stick!' he cried, 'This is the stick he leant upon when he gathered herbs and flowers in the forest and on the grassy plots of St. Peter's Isle. This is the staff of his old age, his companion during his hard life of wandering . . .'. On hearing this eloquence, everyone began to reproach himself for allowing Rousseau's stick to pass into alien hands and, as if to make amends, drew near to touch and handle it and water it with his tears."

Twelve exhibitions on one theme or a pilgrimage during the Rousseau Year

Together with the Swiss Haller and Gessner, Rousseau played an important part in developing the modern feeling for nature. During the Rousseau Year Switzerland has had the original idea of showing the various aspects of the writer's influence by means of twelve exhibitions which will take the pilgrim from Geneva to St. Gall via Montreux, Sierre, Thun, Berne, Neuchâtel, Basle, Aarau and Lucerne. The subjects of these exhibitions are varied: Rousseau's travel diaries on the shores of Lake Geneva during the time of "La Nouvelle Héloïse", Rousseau at his desk, The lakes as the source of poetry, Sunday painters in the heart of nature, the oldest and grandest panorama in the world, paintings as travel mementos or the golden age of the minor masters of Berne, the benefits of walking, scientists and the exploration of the Alps, the art of entertaining, Goethe's travels in Switzerland, painters and the discovery of the Alps, the mountaineer from 1765 to today, the evolution of the feeling for nature through six generations, and warm milk cures! These dozen exhibitions round a single theme will

illustrate the vital influence Rousseau has had on manners, letters and the arts.

When Rousseau was too shy to accept an invitation from Louis XV

When J.-J. Rousseau's "Devin du Village" was performed at the court of Versailles, it met with great success. "That day," wrote Jean-Jacques, "I was in my usual disarray: a growth of beard on my chin and my wig ill-combed . . . The same evening the Duc d'Aumont sent me word to be at the Castle the next morning at eleven o'clock, saying he would present me to the King. M. de Cury, who brought me the message, added it was the common opinion that I was to be given a pension and that the King wished to tell me himself." Jean-Jacques was too shy to go. "What would become of me", he wrote in his Confessions, "if, at that moment before the eyes of the whole court, I had in my confusion perpetrated one of my usual gaffes? This danger alarmed and frightened me and caused me to tremble so much that I resolved, whatever the risk, not to expose myself to it. . . . The next day Jelyotte wrote me a note in which he related in detail the success of my play and the King's great pleasure. All day long, he told me, His Majesty never ceased to sing in the falsest voice in the kingdom: 'I have lost my servant. I have lost all my happiness!'"

The eccentric Englishman's warm-milk cure

This summer, as part of the programme devoted to the J.-J. Rousseau Year, there will be a historical exhibition in St. Gall recalling the early days of tourism in Eastern Switzerland. In an etching to be exhibited showing Gais in the Appenzell, tourists can be seen taking their warm-milk cure. For a long time drinking milk straight from the cow was a veritable craze. The writer Louis Veuillot describes a scene he once saw at the Giessbach falls in the Bernese Oberland in 1938. "An Englishman went there taking with him a cow which he had succeeded in putting on board ship at Brienz after endless difficulties and which accompanied the party, solemnly led by several guides. Arriving at the bottom of the waterfall he drank a glass of warm milk, and then returned without having for a second forfeited his imperturbability or his gravity of demeanour."

The Rousseau Year to commence with a splendid "Old Time Travel Fête"

There will be two highlights in the Rousseau Year, which Switzerland is preparing to celebrate on a grand scale: 2nd June on St. Peter's Island and 28th June at Geneva. On 2nd June the local authorities and some eminent foreign guests will meet on St. Peter's Island. A few days previous to this, stage coaches will have set off from Brussels, Frankfurt, Lyons, Paris, Milan and Munich. The illustrious parties travelling in them will consist of pretty countesses, famous writers and rich merchants who will make their way towards Switzerland in easy stages, stopping by the wayside to admire the beauties of the scenery, and enjoying the charms of leisurely travel. On 2nd June the coaches will arrive at La Neuveville, an attractive little town with a medieval atmosphere, on the shores of the lake of Bièvre. There the parties will row

in decorated boats to the island, where for a few hours they will bring to life again the Sundays Rousseau spoke about.

How painters discovered a new subject, the Alps

One of the most interesting exhibitions to be held this summer in the series devoted to the Rousseau Year is the one at Aarau entitled "Painters Discover the Alps". For centuries the Alps inspired terror in the hearts of men. "There are devils everywhere in the valleys" wrote Rabelais, who in 1541 crossed the Jungfrau massif from Berne to Sion. Fifteen years later Olivier de Magny wrote in verse that he would prefer to live for thirty days in danger of shipwreck rather than cross the Alps again. And this was the general feeling until the end of the seventeenth century. Then suddenly, in 1761, appeared "La Nouvelle Héloïse" by J.-J. Rousseau. Daniel Mornet, French man of letters, writes: "The 'Nouvelle Héloïse' was an immediate and brilliant success. As soon as it went on sale, people fought for copies; they stayed up all night to read it; book lenders asked fabulous prices before they would loan a copy. In the most remote provinces, in Vrès and in Hennebont, there were widespread complaints that they had only got second-rate pirated editions. Nor was the triumph short-lived. Between 1761 and 1800 about seventy different editions appeared, thirty or so in collected works and some forty as separate volumes. With the exception of Voltaire it was far and away the best-seller of the century". Switzerland became the fashion! The Alps drew travellers and painters.

Back to nature or some minor surprises awaiting the first tourists

The publication of "La Nouvelle Héloïse" by J.-J. Rousseau in 1761 put Switzerland right on the map for tourists from one day to the next. The influx of visitors was sudden. Naturally accommodation and amenities were lacking. The archaeologist Jacques Chambry, visiting Switzerland in 1784, tells how, when he descended unexpectedly upon an inn-keeper in Brienz, he was offered a bed to share with an old lady of 83. Mme. de la Briche had to sleep in a room full of cheeses. In 1805 Ulrich Heguer had to accept a room already occupied by five ladies!

Those were the good old days! Today there is no shortage of hotels awaiting the visitor, and Swiss hoteliers have made Swiss hospitality a byword in every corner of the world!

When the Counts of Stollberg bathed in Swiss lakes like the gods of antiquity

After the publication of Gessner's "Idylls" and J.-J. Rousseau's "La Nouvelle Héloïse", it seemed as if Europe had just discovered the new earthly paradise. Goethe, speaking of the Counts Stollberg in his "Memoirs", says: "Bathing seemed to them the quiet-essence of their poetical dreams. In Switzerland they could not resist the temptation to plunge into rivers and lakes . . . But the stark nudity of their bodies was visible from afar and gave rise to scandal. These young people, without evil intent, appeared half-attired like the shepherds of the idylls or completely nude like the pagan gods but were warned by their friends that they were not in some savage land but in a state which was anxious to preserve the uncorrupted morals of the past." In vindication of his travelling companions Goethe explains that they had seen Switzerland through the "tender poetry of Gessner". (SNT0.)

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