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SWISS IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by
Béat de Fischer

(Former Ambassador to the Court of St. James's.)

(Continued)

If most of these travellers came to England as visitors, curious to get to know the country in general, others — the greatest number of them apparently from Zurich and Geneva — were anxious to pursue special studies at Oxford or Cambridge or to fulfil some scientific or religious mission. Thus one could meet at those famous universities such scholars as Pastor Ami Lullin (1748-1816); the jurist Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694-1748), who, inspired by Locke, Cumberland and Pope, published his *Principes du droit naturel et du droit public*, of which no fewer than eleven English translations appeared between 1748 and 1817 and which became the textbook of the Cambridge professors; the theologian Jean Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737), who, with William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury, tried to reconcile all the Protestant churches; the mathematician Nicolas Fatio (1664-1753), a friend of Newton and a Fellow of the Royal Society at 23; Firmin Abauzit (1679-1767), Pastor Benedict Pictet (1625-1724), Doctor Théodore Tronchin (1709-81); and Louis de Lolme (1741-1806), of Geneva, the author, in particular, of an essay on the British constitution which, translated into English and running into many editions, was in its turn for a long time a standard textbook for teachers and students.

The presence in London of Swiss scientists manifested itself more especially when certain great English societies for the advancement of the sciences and the arts came into being. For instance, the Royal Society of Arts, created in 1754, had as one of its founders the agronomist Jean Rodolphe Vautravers (1723-1815), of Romairon (Vaud), and counted among its early members many other Swiss. The same can be said of the Royal College of Surgeons. And it goes without saying that The Royal Society, from its foundation in the seventeenth century, had Swiss scholars among its Fellows such as Nicolas Fatio; Abraham Trembley of Geneva, pedagogue, writer and tutor to the Duke of Portland; Albert de Haller; and Johann-Jakob Scheuchzer, of Zurich (1672-1733), the author of the *Itinera Alpina*. Let me add in passing that Joseph de Planta (1744-1827), the future Chief Librarian of the British Museum, was one of its Secretaries (1776-1804). Furthermore, the close personal relationships between Swiss and British scientists are reflected in the friendship that united Newton, Johann-Jakob Scheuchzer, Hans Sloane, Nicolas Fatio and Firmin Abauzit.

The Genevese influence upon the Methodist movement also deserves a reference here. Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère, of Nyon (1729-85), called Fletcher in England and Vicar of Madeley (Shropshire), was for twenty years Wesley's most faithful collaborator and adviser. Moreover, he was the principal of the first Methodist seminary, founded by Lady Huntingdon in Trevecka, and the lawyer of his church. Wesley himself, in two big volumes, erected a lasting monument to him. In his turn Vincent Perronet (1693-1785), son of a citizen of Château-d'Oex naturalised in England, a famous preacher, worked closely with Wesley and Fletcher. He was called the 'Archbishop of the Methodists'.

At the time of the political troubles in Geneva at the end of the century and while Geneva was under French

occupation, many of her citizens sought shelter in England. This was the case, for instance, with Sismondi; with François d'Ivernois, who took British nationality, was knighted and became a friend of Pitt; with Charles-Ami Lullin, who became friendly with William Wickham; with Mallet Du Pan, the founder of the *Mercurie britannique* in 1798, who, having exhausted all his energy and resources, took refuge in London, where he died, the ancestor of a brilliant line of English civil servants and diplomats.

The century closes in inflammatory speeches at Westminster, in which famous parliamentarians like Pitt, Grenville, Fox, George Canning and others stigmatised France for having destroyed, when invading Switzerland, the very cradle of liberty. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, W. L. Bowles, J. Montgomery and William Wordsworth deplored this tragedy in bitter verses.

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Perhaps more brilliant still, but in any case wider in scope than the part played by Swiss writers, philosophers and scientists, was that of Swiss artists in eighteenth-century England.

Their tradition had already been established by Hans Holbein, of Basle, when he became painter to Sir Thomas More and later to King Henry VIII, and by the famous Genevian miniaturists James Petitot and Jacques Bordier, whose many works still adorn castles, stately homes and museums in this country.

But it was in fact in the eighteenth century, when the Royal Academy of Arts was founded in 1768, that there first came to light the astonishing number of Swiss painters established in London and that their profound influence on contemporary art was recognised. Three of the Founders, five of the Members first elected, and no fewer than three of the first Keepers of that illustrious institution were Swiss.

Behind the back of Sir Joshua Reynolds, whom he disliked, King George III discussed intensively with the chaser, enameller and medallist George Michael Moser, of Schaffhausen (1704-83), the constitution of the new Academy, the nomination of Members and the commissioning of certain paintings. The reason was that Moser had been drawing-master to the sovereign when the latter was Prince of Wales, an honour he owed, apart from his personal merits and his friendly manner, to the fact that he had been the Principal and Treasurer of the celebrated painting academy founded by Hogarth in 1735 at St. Martin's Lane, the cradle of the future Royal Academy. The latter having come into existence, Moser quite naturally became its first Keeper. Sir Joshua Reynolds himself (1723-92) wrote his obituary: 'Of him [Moser], he pointed out, 'it can truly be said in every sense that he was the father of the present race of artists.'²⁰

After his death in 1783 he was succeeded by another Swiss, Agostino Carlini (d. 1790), of Geneva, a well-known sculptor and painter. Somerset House is indebted to him for two allegorical statues representing English rivers. But his best-known work is without doubt Dr. Ward's portrait.

The fourth Keeper of the Academy was yet another Swiss: Heinrich Füssli (1741-1825) of Zurich, or Henry Fuseli as he was called in England. As a painter, art teacher (Blake, Flaxman and Thomas Lawrence were among his students), writer, philosopher and man of the world, he played a primary rôle in the artistic, philosophical and literary life of London. He illustrated Shakespeare and Milton, and his historical drawings helped people to understand better the symbolism of his friend

William Blake. Although his paintings in the heroic vein were not to everyone's taste, he was much appreciated as a teacher, and his *Lectures on Painting* were much in demand. Nothing shows more clearly the esteem in which this original and powerful personality was universally held than the fact that he was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, where he rests, not far from Sir Anthony van Dyke and Sir Christopher Wren, immediately next to Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Of Basle extraction, but passing as the son of a Pole because his father had been at King Stanislaus Poniatowski's court, Philip de Louthembourg (1740-1812) was among the first to be elected a Member of the Royal Academy. Originally engaged by David Garrick as 'Superintendent of scenery and machinery' at the Drury Lane Theatre, he became, with the encouragement of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough, an excellent painter of landscapes and historical battle-pieces. At the end of his life he met Casanova and, curiously enough, turned faith-healer with thousands of patients under his care.

One of his pupils was Sir Francis Bourgeois (1756-1811), of Giez,²¹ who in his turn was among the first Members of the Academy. He is remembered today less as a painter of animals, battle scenes and landscapes, or as painter to George III, than as the donor of the paintings in the imposing Gallery of Masters at Dulwich College. One of his friends, Noël Desenfans, had bought for King Stanislaus a number of classical works intended to form the nucleus of a Polish national collection. But upon the partition of that unfortunate country, the whole collection came into the hands of Bourgeois, who donated it, with substantial funds for its upkeep, to the institution of which it is still the pride. The monumental mausoleum of this generous benefactor still stands in the lovely building designed by Sir John Soane to house the collection.

Another Swiss well known to his contemporaries and also an early Member of the Academy was Johann Waeber (d. 1793), of Berne, John Webber in English, painter, a pupil of Aberli, and official artist of Captain Cook's Third Voyage to the Pacific Ocean (Tahiti) in 1776. He it was who drew the famous scene depicting the great explorer's death. The British Admiralty afterwards published a large album of his drawings. Captain Cook wrote in his journal that he had engaged Webber to travel with him in order to supplement the inevitable deficiencies of written descriptions . . . and to make the results of his efforts interesting and instructive to the seaman, the scholar and the general reader.

One of the only two women elected among the first Members of the Royal Academy was Swiss: Mary Moser (Mrs. Lloyd) (1744-1819), daughter of George Michael Moser and herself a celebrated flower painter and art adviser to Queen Charlotte.

J. F. Rigaud, an excellent artist and a favourite portrait painter with English society, and also an early Member of the Academy, was thought to be Genevan, but was in fact of French extraction, although related to the family bearing the same name in Geneva.

In 1802 H. Singleton painted the famous picture showing the Members of the Royal Academy that year, grouped around their President, Benjamin West, and each one of them a celebrity. No Swiss can contemplate without emotion the faces of so many illustrious compatriots who belonged at that time to such an exalted assembly.

But it was not only in this great institution that one met Helvetic artists. Outside its compass others were able to make a name for themselves in this country. The foremost of these was, of course, Jean-Etienne Liotard

(1702-98), of Geneva, who came to London for the first time about 1756 and then from 1772 to 1774, and whom some English connoisseurs have placed as high as the great Joshua Reynolds himself. At another level, one could also see at work his pupil, L. A. Arlaud (1751-1829), and the miniaturist J. H. Hurter (1734-99), of Schaffhausen; the painter David Morier (1705?-70), of Château-d'Oex, who was protected by William, Duke of Cumberland, and who excelled in painting animals, especially horses, and executed battle-pieces and equestrian portraits (George II, George III, the Duke of Cumberland) — he made no fortune as an artist but became the ancestor of a splendid family of British diplomats; the landscape painter and poet Samuel Hieronimus Grimm (1733-94), of Burgdorf; the famous topographical draughtsman Jakob Schneebeli (d. 1792), of Zurich; Salomon Gessner, son of the poet of Idylls; James Anthony Dassier (1715-59), of Geneva, another engraver, who enjoyed Walpole's patronage.

To these painters and engravers must be added members of other liberal professions, such as the architect Charles-Paul Dangeau de La Belye (1704-81), born in Vevey of Huguenot parents, the builder of the first Westminster Bridge and the author of plans for a new Palace of St. James; Andreas Schalch (1692-1776), of Schaffhausen, who cast the Woolwich bells; Burkhart Tschudi (1718-1773), of Schwanden, a famous harpsichord maker, some of whose instruments, remarkable as much for musical quality as for superb cabinet-making, can still be seen at Chatsworth, Chirk Castle, etc.

A special place belongs to J.-J. Heidegger (1666-1749),²² of Zurich, known both for his breath-taking ugliness, delineated by Hogarth's pencil, and for the valuable and effective help he gave Handel, both as devoted friend and admirer and as librettist and skilful director of the King's Theatre, where they collaborated most amicably.

²⁰ James Northcote, R.A., *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London 1819).

²¹ D. Agassiz, *Sir François Bourgeois* (Lausanne 1937.)

²² Th. Vetter, *Johann Jakob Heidegger ein Mitarbeiter Handels* (Zurich 1902.)

(to be continued.)

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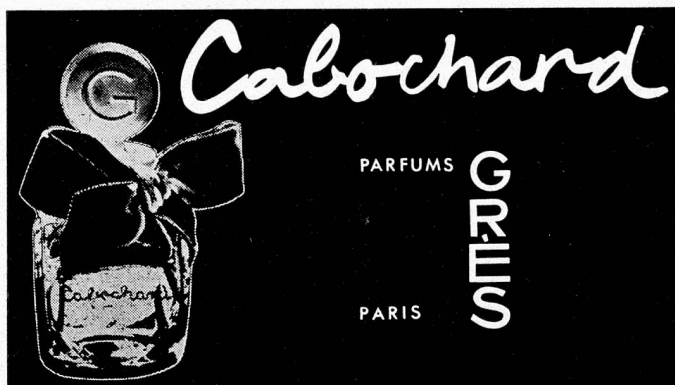
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