

# From Columban to Churchill

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# From Columban to Churchill

THE Director of the Secretariat for Swiss Abroad in Berne, Mr Marcel Ney, gave a talk on "British traces in Switzerland" to the Swiss community in London at a meeting organised by the New Helvetic Society at the Swiss Embassy Lecture Hall.

He began his speech by stressing the difference between Swiss and British emigration, the former arising from the needs of a poor country, the latter more from a sense of adventure, for Britain had always been a wealthy country.

The earliest visitors to Switzerland were those Irish apostles who helped to Christianise the country, such as Columban and his pupil Gallus. One of their companions, Ursicinus, founded a hermitage in the Jura, later the monastery of St. Ursanne. Others went to Tuggen at the upper end of Lake Zurich – the village's coats of arms still displays two monks rowing a boat.

Columban and his companions moved to the Lake of Constance, but Gallus stayed in the wild valley of the Steinach as a hermit. Later, he was worshipped as a saint and died in the year 645. Thanks to him, the scholastic school of St. Gall, the Monastery and Church became famous and many Irish and Scottish scholars were connected with it.

In the early Middle Ages, the Bernard Pass was used by English pilgrims on their way to Rome. It was also used by envoys of the English kings to the papal Curia.

These stayed in great numbers at the Hospice, and the monks assisted the weary travellers. This was the case with one envoy of Henry II in the 12th century, and the monarch richly rewarded the monks.

A man called John Hawkwood, born in Essex in about 1320, earned his laurels in the war between England and France. After the peace of Brétigny, he wandered through

Switzerland, picked up some companions and went to Italy – the Swiss companions becoming the first mercenaries.

At the time of the Reformation, there were close relations between Britain and Switzerland. The Scottish Church looked to Geneva and the English Church to Zurich. After Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) ascended the throne, John Knox settled in Geneva in 1554 and had a great influence on Calvin. He was made an honorary citizen of the town and appears on the Reformation Monument, together with other reformers.

Another Englishman found on the "Mur de la Réformation" is Oliver Cromwell who was in favour of close co-operation with Switzerland in matters of religion.

A number of Swiss painters, engravers and medallionists found Britain an ideal place to work in. Some returned to Switzerland, and portraits of famous English personalities, including kings, now enrich Swiss museums.

Many of the early Swiss immigrants in Britain married English wives and, when they returned to Switzerland, their wives brought with them their culture and belongings, such as Queen Anne furniture and Georgian silver.

Near the end of the 17th century the first British travellers arrived in Switzerland. Usually it was for educational purposes, and they kept diaries telling of their experiences.

At first, there was not much of interest to report, not even by James Boswell who visited Switzerland in about 1765. But then, the glory of the Swiss landscape began to attract Europe's High Society.

The first visitor who followed von Haller's and Rousseau's praise of Switzerland was the Scottish poet James Thomson. His "The Seasons" was the basis for Haydn's great work, and he also wrote a beautiful poem, "Liberty", in which he drew his compatriots'

attention to the glory of the Swiss mountains.

After that, there was no stopping the landslide of enthusiasm on the part of English writers and travellers. Thomas Gray, George Keate, the Irishman Oliver Goldsmith, William Wordsworth – all praised Switzerland in some of their works.

Other enthusiastic reports about Switzerland were given by the travelling tutors of sons of great British families – Switzerland became a must in any "grand tour", which was also becoming a must at that time. William Coxe accompanied the son of the Duke of Marlborough and John Moore the son of the Duke of Hamilton.

Some of the travellers simply stayed in Switzerland, for instance, Edward Gibbon, author of "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". He lived in Lausanne for 16 years and also wrote a history of the Confederation; unfortunately, only the introduction remains.

Philippe Stanhope became a professor at Geneva University, as did William Wickham before being appointed British Chargé d'Affaires in Berne.

In the second half of the 18th century, there were regular English communities in Switzerland, particularly in Lausanne and Geneva.

An impressive account of travelling in those days was written by Georgina Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, who wrote a heroic report entitled "The Passage of St Gotthard". From the time she spent her last comfortable night at the famous "Three Kings Hotel" in Basle, it took her six days before she reached the pass and a few more before getting to Lugano.

In the 19th century, visitors from England could perhaps be called tourists. Surprisingly, this form of travelling began during the grim days of the Napoleonic Wars.

A Lausanne patrician noted this in his diary of 1814: "Il y pleut des Lords et des Ladies". And, two years later, a citizen of Geneva stated that he could see nothing but English people – the whole of London seemed to have been transported to the continent and most of it to Geneva.

He remarked on the distinction and beauty of the women and the talent of the men, half of them peers and MPs.

Apart from the beautiful landscape, many visitors were attracted by the Swiss educational system and democratic institutions.

One of the most famous tourists was Lord Byron who spent the entire summer of 1816 in Switzerland and met famous Swiss personalities.

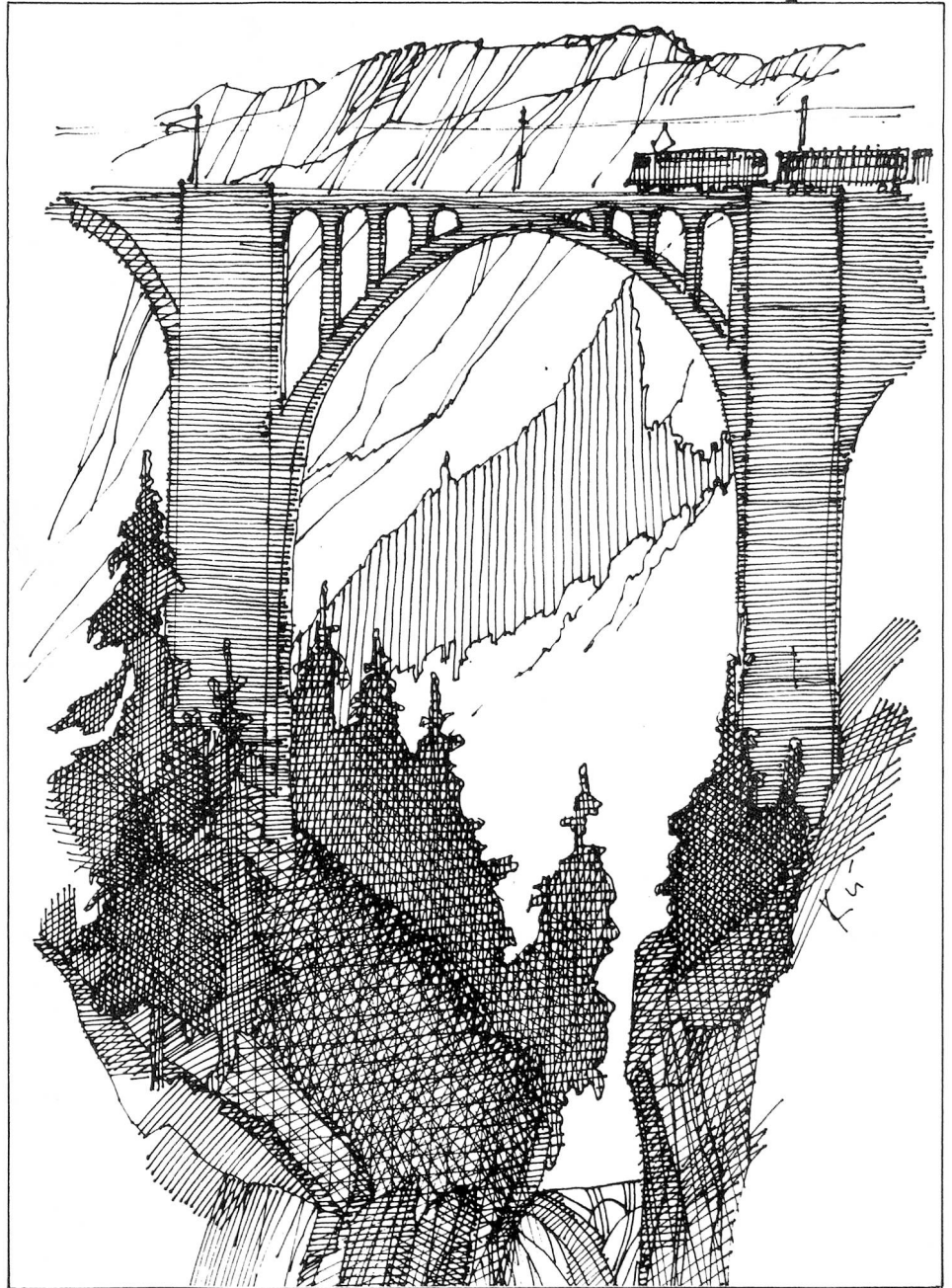
He went to the Lake of Geneva with his friend Shelley and wrote his well-known poem "The Prisoner of Chillon", and he referred to Switzerland in his "Child Harold's Pilgrimage". He wrote a journal for his sister, in which he describes his journey to the Bernese Oberland, and "Manfred" takes place in the Unspunnen Castle.

By and by, the cultural interests of the English travellers gave way to the recreational – a few weeks of peace and hiking in the mountains.

Queen Victoria visited Switzerland in 1872 and stayed at the luxurious Hotel Axenfels, above Brunnen. Her visit really set the ball of British tourism rolling.

Suddenly, the hotel industry became fond of things British – Victoria Hotels, five o'clock tea, tennis courts and golf links. Sherry, port and whisky, bacon and eggs, Irish stew, mint sauce and Yorkshire pudding.

At least 60 English churches and chapels were built, and English tea rooms and chemist



**Turn to Page 18**

## From Page 17

shops were opened. Holidays in Switzerland became a barometer of social position in England.

Switzerland finally became so popular that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle found it fitting to use the waterfalls at Meiringen as the setting for the final duel between Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty!

Switzerland has to be grateful to the British tourists for developing both summer mountaineering and winter sports.

It was Englishmen who first climbed the most dangerous mountains. Edward Whymper, Lord Douglas, Douglas Hadow and the Rev. Charles Hudson, aided by Zermatt mountain guides, climbed the Matterhorn, and the expedition ended in tragic deaths (16th July 1865).

An Englishman founded the first Alpine Club in 1857, an Englishman first played tennis championships in Switzerland and first steered an automobile on winding pass roads.

Englishmen first used ice rinks and did tobogganing (Davos 1881) and used the bobsleigh run, the Cresta Run, at St. Moritz. The Richardson brothers from London were the first British skiers, and Conan Doyle was the first to cross the Mayenfelder Furka in 1890.

The British had their own favourite holiday places, Muerren, Wengen, Zermatt, St. Moritz, not forgetting the old Gurnigel Bad.

They were so popular that, at the height of the season, summer and winter, the sleeping car Calais – Interlaken was often uncoupled in Berne and put on the Gurbental Railway. Passengers could get off at Thurnen where a special shelter had been built, today's only reminder of a glorious past.

An important personality should be mentioned, Sir Arnold Lunn, a great enthusiast for sports and cultural contacts in Switzerland; the Muerren region especially owes much to his efforts.

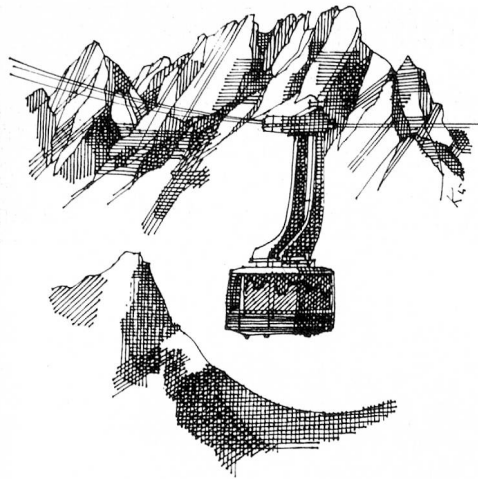
Some of the earliest winter tourists in Davos were patients with lung diseases, and it is to their credit that even in sickness they were sports pioneers.

Some became permanent residents, especially writers, among them John Simonds whose first work was "Our life in the Swiss Highlands".

Robert Louis Stevenson lived in Davos from 1880 to 1882. Together with his stepson, he printed poems and drawings in an amateur undertaking "The Davos Press".

Beatrice Harradan wrote a novel set in the Davos sanatorium world of 1893 – "Ships that pass in the Night". Katherine Mansfield visited Switzerland repeatedly between 1910 and 1924, particularly Montreux.

Many hotels became very English, also by name: Mountain House, Suvretta House, Chantarella House. Hotels and private



houses showed trends towards English architectural style. Every new style in England was copied, English Palladian Renaissance (Westend Terrace in Zurich), Victorian new Gothic style, followed by the art nouveau country house.

Baillie Scott was particularly popular; he was known for the Villa Waldbuehl in Uzwil and Haus Alther in Zurich – even furniture, wallpaper and curtains were imported from England.

Stanley Hall, Easton and Robertson built the beautiful English-style country house at Buonas on the Lake of Zug (where Mrs Thatcher recently spent a private holiday).

The English way of life was also introduced – nurseries with English nannies, ladies retiring to drawing rooms after dinner with the men remaining to enjoy port and cigars.

English architects such as Victor Colin and his son James, were called to Switzerland to embellish Swiss castles, Oberhofen, Gorgier, the Tour de Champel and others.

Many wealthy British families owned houses in Switzerland, the Bartons in Geneva (Mrs Barton was the granddaughter of William Pitt the Younger); Sir Ernest Cassel, friend of King Edward VII and Churchill, on the Riederalp (his granddaughter became the wife of Lord Mountbatten).

Many British colonials retired to Switzerland – for a time there were at least 300 such families living in the Montreux-Vevey region.

From those circles came John Caulfield, Christopher Sykes and John Howard – and their efforts resulted in the establishment of the Centre for Moral Rearmament in Caux.

In recent years, Switzerland became a tax haven for rich people such as Noel Coward and Charlie Chaplin. But, even when taxes went up in Switzerland, too, rich British people settled there and were made very welcome.

There were also significant business and industrial aspects to the British presence in Switzerland.

The most important example of this is Charles Brown, born in Axelbridge near

London in 1827, who worked with Sulzer Brothers in Winterthur where they founded the Swiss Locomotive and Machine Factory in 1871. His two sons, Charles Eugene Lancelot and Sidney, together with Walter Boveri from the Valais, founded the world-famous firm of Brown Boveri in Baden.

British firms were also in the forefront in other fields. The proud Kirchenfeld Bridge in Berne was built by an English engineer, and a British finance company planned the entire lower Kirchenfeld quarter and also erected most of the buildings there. The engineer, Skipworth, became the first president of the British Chamber of Commerce.

Here, too, the First World War brought things to a standstill. Only here and there does one hear of occasional British participation in various Swiss companies.

The most spectacular example is that of Trust House Forte, which arranged a combined leasing and management contract concerning the oldest existing international grand hotel in Switzerland, the Hôtel des Bergues in Geneva, which is 150 years old.

Of course, there were also many British artists who painted in Switzerland, particularly Turner with his wonderful Swiss water colours.

An English artist, Clement Heaton, made unrivalled mosaics, and his murals can be admired in many public buildings and churches – for instance, the imprisonment of Wilhelm Tell and the foundation of the town of Berne, both in the courtyard of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich.

Other works are in the Cathedral of Neuchâtel and the Eglise St François in Lausanne.

English schools also deserve a mention, particularly the finishing schools for young ladies, though few remain. The St. George School at Clarens is one.

The speaker ended by mentioning Sir Winston Churchill who showed so much understanding of the Swiss position during the war and her neutrality. He was perhaps the greatest of all British friends of Switzerland.

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