

# Letter from Switzerland

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The Festsalle at *Lucerne* will harbour the 5<sup>th</sup> International Boat and Aquatic Sports Exhibition (IBA) between May 7 and 15. From May 7 to 17 the Federal Capital *Berne* will provide an opportunity to see what is new in Trade, Agriculture, Industry and Commerce with the exhibition

BEA 1966, and between May 22 and 26 the interest of a wide public will be aroused by the 4<sup>th</sup> Toy and Souvenir Exhibition in *Berne*. *Basle* will provide the location for the *Espa*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Bakery and Confectionary Trade Fair, from May 13 to 22.

## LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

James Blaisdell Wetherby visited Switzerland for the first time just over one hundred years ago. It is therefore fitting that the gifted American poet and novelist now be accorded the recognition he so richly deserves in the country he loved so much.

The works of James Blaisdell Wetherby have been of considerable benefit to Switzerland, despite the fact that Wetherby himself—modest by nature—remains relatively unfamiliar. Yet we have all read, and profited from, the stirring words of his epic poem, *An Alptime Wonder*. But how many of us realize that, were it not for Wetherby's glowing description of the Val Bain-de-Mousse, this popular spa and winter resort might still be unknown today? Wetherby came from a simple, yet remarkable background. He grew up on the outskirts of Miskiwawa Junction, a former Iroquois settlement on Long Island. As a child, he spent hour upon hour studying the multicolored clamshells which the wildly tossing surf deposited on the fine white sand of the South Shore. On one of his excursions to the beach, Wetherby came upon a piece of driftwood with strange foreign markings on it. After careful examination, he was able to decipher the words: "Made in Switzerland—Another Swiss Quality Product—For Export Only." The die was decidedly cast. Young James knew that the far-off country which had produced this driftwood must be fascinating, and from that time forward he was obsessed with the idea of visiting Europe—and Switzerland!

After completing his studies in England, James Blaisdell Wetherby's wish was fulfilled. He entered Switzerland on horseback, at Basel, having traveled from London via Paris and Troyes. Here an excerpt from his journal, dated May 14, 1865:

"This day we proceeded from Bâle to Neuchâtel, a neat, orderly town at the foot of the Jura mountains and on the western shore of the lake which bears the same name as the town. If I could but describe to you the deep blue of these waters! As tranquil a scene as had already met my travel-weary eyes, I nevertheless felt a certain restlessness, for the purpose of my visit—to enter true alpine country—had yet to be accomplished. Far in the distance, in an easterly direction many leagues away, swathed in the pale mists, lay the ice-covered giants—the mountains of the Ober Land. I sensed their mysterious presence even though I could not always see them. I felt the inspiration they had bestowed on generations of writers before me. The day was crisp and pleasant, what one would expect of springtime in Switzerland. A peasant maid, wearing her native costume, waved prettily and bid us *bonjour* as we made great haste towards Berne, seat of the Confederation, historical metropolis, gateway to the sleeping glacial eminences of the Ober Land."

Switzerland is proud of those artists and writers of the past who sought inspiration or refuge within her borders. For this reason, the Swiss National Council decided to publish a special commemorative set of Wetherby's works, including his *Swiss Journal*, the alpine poems and novels, and a critical essay, *What Will the Stormy Wetherby?*, by Gilfred Mascoach, F. B. I.

The first volume of the set contains Wetherby's best known lines, inspired by Lord Byron and the Castle of Chillon. The poem is entitled *Le lac est beau et grand*:

*Upon yon peak, O gold of Spring,  
The Dent-du-Midi, let fantasy ring,  
Without the rays of sun and shine,  
What would it be, were it thine?*

*The waters below, upon the Chillon,  
Cast their spell—O vast carillon!—  
Whose tones sound bold upon the old,  
A noble story, never told.*

*Lac Léman, why must I leave thee?  
Travelling on will never relieve me  
Of thoughts enchanting, spun in silk,  
How I crave this land of milk!*

This was James Blaisdell Wetherby's literary greeting to Switzerland, a country he would learn to admire and understand even more as the years passed. Although he made several trips to America during the following three decades, Wetherby considered Switzerland his home. This was officially confirmed by the Cantonal Parliament of Appenzell, which granted Wetherby the first residence and work permit it had ever issued by official decree. The poet thanked his benefactors in characteristic style:

*Had I but guessed that I, the guest,  
Were blessed by test, in quest of rest,  
The best of crests upon my vest  
Caressed in nests along the West.*

James Blaisdell Wetherby lived the greater part of his life in Switzerland. When he died, in 1899, there were few who remembered him, for he had spent his last years quite alone, studying mineralogy and glaciology on the Pfannenstiel, near Zurich. He told occasional visitors that this area reminded him of the Texas Panhandle, the subject of one of his earlier novels.

This unique poet, this Titan among men, lived quietly and peacefully. His discovery that the thermal springs of the Val Bain-de-Mousse contained pure gold, in addition to sulphur, obviously contributed to the world-wide attraction of this spa. In fact, it was the first time in recent history that one could take the waters in an aura of wealth and other assorted minerals.

Switzerland owes a debt of gratitude to James Blaisdell Wetherby, one that will be paid when, on the two hundredth anniversary of the poet's first visit, a "Wetherby Year" will be proclaimed. In the meantime, interested readers may obtain the booklet, *James Blaisdell Wetherby—The Peregrinations of a Popular Poet*, now being prepared by the writer's granddaughter, Heidi Miskiwawa Wetherby.