

Book reviews

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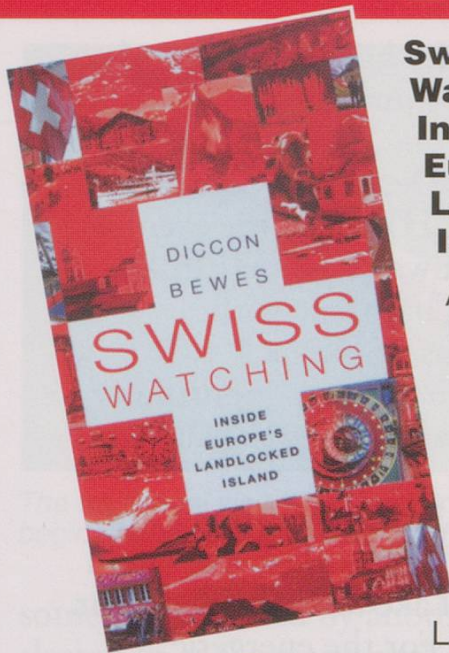
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Swiss Watching – Inside Europe's Landlocked Island

Author: Diccon Bewes.

Published by: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 3-5, Spafield Street, London, EC1R 4QB.

Language:

English. 310 pages.

Format: 215mm x 132mm, softcover.
ISBN:978-1-85788-548-4. Price: £12.99.
Internet: www.nicholasbrealey.com

I discovered this book, written by the manager of the Stauffacher English Bookshop in Bern, on the swissinfo website and it has been a source of delight and information as I read, and chuckle, about things that are only too true about the Swiss. I have been going to the country since 1958, and with the onset of anno domini, walking tours are now rail and coach tours, but did I really know the Swiss? What Swiss quirks are there that I know not about? This book answered these questions, but again anno domini dictates that I had better get on with this review before I forget all the details that fill its pages!

Early on the author starts by explaining that his adopted country is a complex place. For example he notes that it has nine names in common use. Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft; Confédération Suisse; Confederazione svizzera; confederazium svizre; generally abbreviated to Schweiz; Suisse; Svizzera; Svizra; but only one official one Confoederatio Helvetica, and as he says, "for a country that prides itself on accuracy – and not just in its train timetables – it's ironic that its official name is technically incorrect". By page 8 the author has likened the Swiss people to a bunch of coconuts whose private shell it is difficult to penetrate, explaining that is why they answer the phone with just their surname. He chooses the coconut as a metaphor because he suggests that Switzerland is like a desert island. The Swiss Family Robinson didn't need to be shipwrecked, they could have stayed at home, where the three requirements are of a retreat, a lifeboat in a storm and an island since the inhabitants isolate themselves from the outside world and sometimes, with the valley communities, even from each other. To help

understand them he gives ten sets of Swiss Watching Tips, each running humorously to about 3-pages, plus a section on Swiss Survival – including mastering "Swinglish". Through his narrative Diccon leads you easily into the country and its people in a manner that could only come from an author who loves his subject matter. From my knowledge of the country the book is factually accurate and written in a very easy to read style with plenty of wry smiles coming with the stories he tells.

All I can say is buy it and read it. As you do people will wonder why you are smiling all the time as you learn (and in my case forget) fascinating things. The book rejoices in Swissness, a word that the author notes "encapsulates the country's sense of self like nothing else. Using a made-up foreign word to express a national desire may sound contradictory but this is Switzerland. This is a landlocked island, and there's no bigger contradiction in terms than that".

Roger Keyworth

The Essential Guide to Welsh Heritage and Scenic Railways

Author: Mervyn Jones. Published by: The Oakwood Press, PO Box 13, Usk, Monmouthshire, NP15 1YS.

Language: English. 192 pages with numerous photographs in full colour.

Format: A5 - 5" x 8", softcover.

ISBN: 978-0-85361-720-0. Price: £16.95.

Internet: www.oakwoodpress.co.uk

Obviously, from the title, this is not about Switzerland. It is the latest in the series of Railway Guide Books that SRS member Mervyn Jones has produced in association with Oakwood Press. This new volume follows a similar layout to his books on French, Swiss and Austrian railways, although this one has become a guide to all railways in Wales and the Borders, but is none the worse for that. Each of the 62 similar sized sections in the book refers to a length of railway (or a location) and gives basic historic and operational details, along with other items of information useful to visitors to the specific areas. This does mean that the major "Heritage" lines perhaps do not get the coverage that might have been expected, although visitors to Porthmadog, Tywyn, Llanfair, etc. will obviously be able to gather considerably more information locally. Inevitably there are some Swiss links. The original steam locos on the Snowdon Mountain Railway came from SLM at Winterthur and the line uses the Swiss-designed Abt rack system. It has been called the Welsh Brienz Rothorn Bahn.

As with his previous books the text is accompanied by a wealth of excellent photographs from both Mervyn, and Caroline

his long-suffering wife. I had not realised that he is a member of the Royal Photographic Society (and has a personal page on its website) but even his talents have struggled to try and make trains in Arriva's awful turquoise colour scheme look good. Hopefully in time new owners DB's red livery will prevail. It is almost made for Wales. There is a map this time, courtesy of Arriva and an index, so the major problems with the earlier volumes have been tackled. The only glaring error seen was a passing reference to the Canadian Province of New Brunswick being in the USA. I hope that Oakwood's North American distributors will issue an apology with each book sold!

Editor

Peter's Railway to the rescue

Author and Publisher: Christopher Vine, PO Box 9246, Bridge of Weir, PA11 3WD. English. 96 pages, many in full colour. Format 9.5" x 7" hardback. ISBN 978-0-9553359-4-5 Price £11.99 each plus £1.50 p&p from the above address. Also available at many preserved railway's book/gift shops or via www.petersrailway.com.

OK, again it's not Switzerland – but there is snow! This is the latest book in the Peter's Railway series that has already sold over 15,000 copies, and is aimed at children aged between 6 and 12. The narrative revolves around Peter and his Grandpa and their private railway, although they have now moved on to building a watermill. The text is punctuated with simple to understand

explanations of factual information about how railways, and other mechanical things, work as well as promoting a green agenda. I cannot better the comment in the foreword by the Rolls Royce Director of Engineering and Technology: "These books show children that it really can be fun to work with mechanical objects whilst keeping an eye on issues regarding the environment and sustainability. Only technology will resolve the dilemmas surrounding these problems." Buy it, read it and pass it on to your children, grandchildren, etc as a Christmas or birthday present.

Editor

Reiju Calendars

For members who do not have room to display one of the excellent calendars produced by the society I can recommend the series produced by Reiju. These are brilliantly designed in many respects. There is a cover page which has a cut-out to show the January picture. The pictures are in fact removable postcards (with very comprehensive information on the reverse) which can be used as such. The calendars can be hung conventionally from the hoop or, by pressing out two cut-outs from the stout cardboard back cover, they can be made free standing. I've just bought the Rhatische Bahn version which has a dozen very interesting views and includes some most unusual shots. They are available from van den Burg in Holland at €7.50 plus €4.50 p&p which is extremely good value. Go to www.swissstore.nl, click on "Taal" to select the English version then click on the second Calendars 2011 tab which takes you to the publishers' selection page. Then click on Reiju Calendars.

Piers Milne

CHRISTMAS COMPETITION

A Christmas question. What was the date of the inaugural run of the Glacier Express? The answer can be found in several publications including an excellent new book "**Swiss Watching**" by Diccon Bewes that is reviewed in this edition. I bought my copy of the book some months ago. It is both a good read and a mine of information on Switzerland. The question has been set by Diccon, and the publishers have kindly donated two copies of his book to the Society and these will go to the first two correct answers drawn "out of the hat" at our January Editorial Meeting. Your entry, by either email or post, should be sent to the Editor (contact details on P3 of this magazine) to arrive no later than the **2nd January 2011**. The usual competition conditions apply; editor's decision final; no correspondence entered into; no alternative prizes; etc. If you email please put "Swiss Express Competition" in the Subject Box to avoid the clutches of the spam filter.

PHOTO: Keith Scotland