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Life-giving Waters

Biographical notes

The writer and poet Maurice Zermatten was born at St. Martin on 22nd October 1910. On completion of his studies at Fribourg University, he became lecturer in French literature at the «Gymnase» of Sion.

As author of many publications, he was awarded the Gottfried Keller Prize, the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature and an honorary doctorate of the University of Fribourg.

In the Rhone Valley, the aqueducts have been the preoccupation of the rural population from one century to the next. It is the consequence of the driness of our climate and the poverty of our soil in this rocky country of ours. For fifty generations of our ancestors, water meant life. Without water no harvest. Driness means misery and death. The «bisse», the water duct is the vein which transports the vital element into the body dried out by the sun.

This means that the «bisses» are as old as the Valais civilization. Cranks would have it that it was the Arabs or, as we call them the Saracens who taught us the art of survival. This is an art which man discovers inside himself as soon as he is in danger. I watch children playing near water. With a small piece of wood or a pebble they spontaneously invent veritable aqueducts. The small stream is channelled according to their whims. A small boy is victorious over the inherent tendency of the water to follow the steepest gradient. The fragile barrage breaks all the laws of physics and the water flows where it had no intention of flowing.

It would be condemning the mountain dweller as an imbecile to maintain that he had lived for centuries in the neighbourhood of our great waterfalls and rivers without getting the idea of making use of them in order to fight hunger. Under the heat of

our summers, the harvest burns. The heat of high summer is mortal. Get a few steps away, the water runs uselessly into the Rhone... The remedy exists in the next room, whilst the patient suffers in his bed and dies. And nobody would have the idea to fetch the remedy?...

What I want to say is that the «bisses» are as old as our agriculture, as our paths and routes, our houses. Communal life was only possible, especially in the mountains, thanks to the «bisses». In turn, their use has improved ever more in the course of centuries. In order to construct the long ducts in the varied topographical terrain, it was necessary that the community organized itself and became aware of its collective responsibility and means. It is not in the power of one man alone to lead the water canals along the unconquerable rocks. The example of the old «bisse» of Savîèse is a most enlightening witness of a victory which was only possible by welding together all the forces available in a region which was threatened by famine year after year. The aqueduct or death... And these people of the 13th century achieved what seems to us today a veritable miracle: trimmed the walls of the vertical rocks and constructed the «bisses» with a courage and an intelligence which still today fills us with wonder.

Thus the whole Valais gradually became dotted with an immense system of canalization which is so fragile that it has to be serviced every spring in order to be operational. Ant's work, ancient obstinacy and fabulous enterprise which require the energy of all the men and women, for the women like the men take part in this drudgery. They use the pickaxe and the shovel just like the men.