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Dr. Stephan Müller, Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Berne

Heidi Willumat, Service for the Swiss Abroad, Department of Foreign Affairs, Berne

Jacques Matthey-Doret, Radio-Télévision Suisse romande, Lausanne

Translation:

Richard Jan Tickle, John Miles

Publisher, central editorial offices and advertising administration:

Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad

Alpenstrasse 26

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The Appenzell masked beggars of old have turned into the picturesque mummers of today – Switzerland's best-known New Year's attraction. (Photo: Emilia Magro)

Editorial

A Balance Sheet



«Switzerland is not an experiment which must be broken off», said Friedrich Dürrenmatt crisply and concisely. This is a remark which applies equally well to the 700-year jubilee which is now drawing to an end and to the future in an all-European context which is becoming ever more clearly discernable.

For Swiss citizens both at home and abroad, 1991 will go down as the year

of a thousand special memories, big and small, from the radiant Botta tent, the grandiose festival performances and the old-fashioned processions throughout the country to the heavy doses of criticism of all that is Swiss, particularly from within the country – both constructive and destructive. 1991 will also be seen as a historic landmark for Switzerland with the disappearance of three of the century's great figures, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Max Frisch and Jean Tinguely – losses for literature and art all over the world which cannot be overestimated. Apart from the global applications of their work, however, each one of them has held a mirror up to the Swiss – each in his own very special way – and has warned them against the dangers of freewheeling into the future without a true purpose. In this way these three remarkable men have made a significant contribution to self-realisation on both the personal and political levels.

The process of questioning and searching directed towards a Swiss identity – if such a thing exists (and even if it does there must be as many definitions of it as there are Swiss) – has been shown in one sphere most particularly, something which has enjoyed very great popularity during the jubilee year: the sphere of folk traditions. With their many symbolic and scenic features these represent to us a reality which is only half-visible, but without which the contemporary world cannot easily be understood and even less easily managed. At a time when there are increasing complaints of lack of purpose and direction the components of folklore give to many a feeling of security and protection. In this yearning for reassurance we Swiss are not greatly different from people of other lands and other cultures.

However, when we really try to filter out what is essential in Swiss customs, we come to a conclusion that is as hackneyed as it is astonishing – that this essential has to do with the idea of Alpine valleys and pastoral virtues as the veritable incarnation of what is Swiss. It is as if Switzerland were really composed entirely of mountains and that the majority of the Swiss have really always lived from them alone. There is a sense in which our folk history – which is in reality not so very old and grew up in the nineteenth century along with our national consciousness – reflects not so much the real past of our country as the mythical values of the Rütli: freedom and the readiness to defend it.

H. Willumat

Heidi Willumat, Editor

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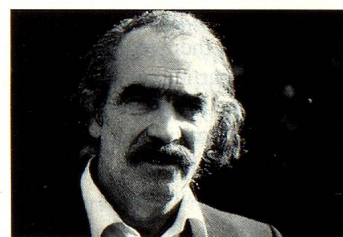
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