

An intellectual escape to Switzerland

Autor(en): **J.J.F.S.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1946)**

Heft 1049

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689501>

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AN INTELLECTUAL ESCAPE TO SWITZERLAND.

"Escape to Switzerland" by G. R. de Beer, F.R.S.
Penguin No. 490, price 1/-.

This is not, as the title might suggest, a tale of prisoners of war or political refugees seeking sanctuary in what the author calls a benevolent land. The word escape is used in metaphorical sense; it is meant to convey a journey of the mind, a release from the preoccupations of a harassed and war-weary world.

The author, an eminent professor at University College, London, has written other books on Switzerland. A scholar and a scientist, he possesses a wide knowledge of history, art, music and literature. He has to his credit works written in French and a "German Reader for Biology Students." Thus equipped, Mr. de Beer has brought to bear on this book a profound and extensive learning. The bibliography of nearly 300 volumes catalogued at the end of the book is evidence of the vast amount of literary research which has gone to its making.

The subject matter is varied and covers a wide range. There is no continuous narrative; the book consists of a number of essays and studies, all having a Swiss background. It teems with facts and information much of which has not been published before. How many of us, for instance, know that Fenimore Cooper

once marched in the ranks of the Swiss infantry, that Louis Napoleon, later to become Emperor of France, received his training as an artillery officer at Thun, that Madame Tussaud came from Berne and that it was on the Furka Pass, of all places, Joseph Conrad determined to go to sea? These and many other discoveries invest the book with a peculiar charm.

The musical-minded will find matter for controversy in Chapter VI. There, the ingenious theory is advanced that a connection may exist between the Rigi alhorn and the fourth movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, and that the outline of the Alpine horizon is probably reflected in the music Brahms composed while staying at Thun. We are reminded that Liszt and Weber both derived inspiration from the mountain scene and that Wagner created several of his works in the villa he occupied near Lucerne.

In the literary field, the author passes in review a galaxy of names, from the early humanists to modern times, including Arnold Lunn, that talented writer and great friend of Switzerland.

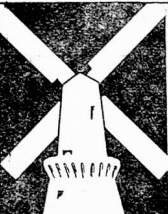
A chapter is devoted to the Shelley episode in which the poet added the words "Philanthropist and Atheist" to his name on the hotel register and tells how Byron struck them out later.

One of the most absorbing studies deals with Jürg Jenatsch, that turbulent son of the Grisons, hero of C. F. Meyer's historical novel. Jenatsch's activities, his tortuous and Machiavellian politics and his violent death in a tavern brawl in Chur are narrated with skill and erudition.

Two more chapters deserve mention. One is a detailed survey of the complicated military operations which culminated in the battle of St. Gotthard during which so much of our fair land was devastated by the French, Austrian and Russian armies. Mr. de Beer's researches have led him to the conclusion that in the absence of reliable maps, the French commanders, beside making use of forcibly impressed local guides, based much of their strategy on a relief model constructed by General Pfyffer which can still be seen in the Lucerne Gletscher garden. The other is a biography of Marc-Theodore Bourrit, native of Geneva, a great lover of the Alps whose writings have become classics of their kind. This study was originally written in French but the outbreak of war prevented its publication.

Altogether, Mr. de Beer's book is a stimulating and valuable contribution to the literature on Switzerland and the editors of the Penguin series are to be commended for having made it accessible to the general public. It is to be hoped that his next work on Switzerland, now in preparation, will also appear in a cheap reprint.

J.J.F.S.




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