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ART & CULTURE

Switzerland: **in the eye of the beholder**

Swiss News takes a closer look at where some of the stereotypes and prejudices come from that many English-speakers, visitors and expats alike, carry with them about the country they love to hate – and how perceptions are changing.

In 1816, Lord Byron wrote a poem, *The Prisoner of Chillon,* about Francois Bonivard, chained in the castle's dungeons from 1532-1536

By Gail Mangold-Vine | Prosaic, crusty, and boring in a land of neutrality, "strangely knotted" goings-on, and splendid scenery – sound familiar?

How cliché

To a great extent that's the way Switzerland is still perceived by English-language observers today, along with a healthy dose of patronising amusement at the twee-ness of it all: the cows and the cheese, the gnomes, and the trains that run with clock-like regularity. A line by Scottish comedian Billy Connolly sums that up pretty well: "I've always wanted to go to Switzerland to see what the army does with those wee red knives."

Slowly, however, according to the new French-language book *La Suisse vue par les écrivains de langue anglaise* (Switzerland as seen by writers of the English language) by Patrick Vincent, a Swiss-born professor of English and American literature at the University of Neuchâtel, the negative clichés are changing. Clichés that formed in the 19th century and persisted – with a reputation for sinister dealings and small-minded punctiliousness tacked on as the 20th century progressed – are being supplanted by a more nuanced view of a complex country: a democracy enriched and burnished by increased international involvement and multiculturalism challenged as all societies are by an underbelly of troublesome issues.

This new view draws some on the way Switzerland used to be perceived in the 18th century when the Grand Tour brought increasing numbers of observers from Great Britain: as the ideal democracy.

"Remember, until 1776, when the United States declared its independence, Switzerland – then an assemblage of republics and democracies – was the only free state in the world," Patrick Vincent told *Swiss News* in a phone interview. "Travellers saw it as a kind of political lab; they came to learn."

Cometh Napoleon

There was a strong dose of romanticism in this view of Switzerland, accompanied by quite a bit of mythologising about the country's history (William Tell et al) and swooning at its sublime natural endowments – mountains, valleys and lakes. These idealisations took a nosedive when, in 1798, Napoleon invaded Switzerland. "There came a tyrant, and with holy glee, Thou fought'st against him; but hast vainly striven …" wrote poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) in *Thought of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland.*

"There was this notion that a free state could never be invaded," says Vincent. "Many felt let down by Switzerland, as if she'd betrayed them" – and eyes and minds now opened more sharply to criticism of the country.

Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, a banally materialistic, middle-class mindset was also starting to colour perceptions of Switzerland. John Murray's 1836 guide of Switzerland followed by Baedeker's in 1861 treated touring the country like a paint-by-numbers experience. Mountain climbing was also the height of fashion: Alpine peaks were not there to be admired in all their unattainable glory – they were there to be ascended.

Switzerland was always a land of refugees, but now they were no longer just religious and political. Progressively into the 1900s, in the words of Vincent, Switzerland became a place for "young Americans to come to ski and forget their responsibilities, anarchists to lead a quiet life, writers to hide their neuroses, hard-nosed millionaires to give full sway to their boundless greed, and the sick to come die in peace. In the first half of the 20th century, clinics, private banks and luxury boutiques made up the new Swiss landscape. That was the country's reassuring side. The other side of the coin was the malaise that permeated all of western civilization."

And it was that – the "materialism and spiritual sterility" – that modern writers picked up on, perhaps best encapsulated by Ernest Hemingway's short story "Homage to Switzerland". The author's own description of the tale he wrote in a submission letter to *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in 1932 says it all:

"The fact that the three parts [of the story] all open the same way or practically the same is intentional and is supposed to represent Switzerland metaphysically where it all opens in the same way always and where a young man will not marry a young lady until she has had her original teeth out and her store teeth in since that is an eventual expense that the girl's father, not her husband, should bear. But possibly, Mr. Lengel [the *Cosmo* editor], you have been to Switzerland yourself. Anybody will have been there when they

Just in time for Halloween

On the night of June 16, 1816, in a villa in Cologny overlooking Lake Geneva, English poet Lord Byron and his guests Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Shelley's wife-to-be, were seated round the fire reading scary stories aloud. A massive storm with terrible bursts of crackling lightning had come up during the visit, preventing Byron's guests from returning to their accommodation. Byron suggested they try their own hand at writing ghost stories. What 19-year-old Mary finally produced was published in 1818: *Frankenstein.*

Partially set in Geneva, the story tells the tale of Dr. Frankenstein, who creates and then loses control over a dangerous monster. In the movies, the creature is called Frankenstein, but originally his creator bore the name. One of the novel's spookiest scenes also takes place on a stormy night and uses Mount Salève, which rises up just behind the city of Geneva, as a prop in an unforgettable scene. Here's how Dr. Frankenstein tells it:

"While I watched the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on … I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently; I could not be mistaken.

A flash of lightning illuminated the object and discovered its shape to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy demon to whom I had given life … my teeth chattered and I was forced to lean against the tree for support. The figure passed quickly and I lost it in the gloom … I thought of pursuing the devil, but it would have been in vain, for another flash discovered him to be hanging among the rocks of the nearly perpendicular ascent of Mont Salêve [sic], a hill that bounds Plainpalais on the south. He soon reached the summit and disappeared."

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"This is the charmingest place we have ever lived …" – From a letter by Mark Twain, who lived in Weggis for two months in 1897

read the Homage." (*Cosmopolitan* didn't buy the story.)

Coming of age?

For all the maligning, the number of writers who have had things to say about Switzerland, or spent time and sometimes settled in the Confederation, is quite startling for a country that isn't even twice the size of New Jersey. The names John Milton, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov, Truman Capote, Anita Brookner – not to mention widely translated heavy-hitters like Voltaire, the poet Rilke, Colette, Thomas Mann, Elias Canetti and Jose Luis Borges – do not begin to exhaust the list.

Patrick Vincent sees glimmers of changed awareness in books written from the 1990s on. He quotes the novel by Australian Robert Dessaix, *Night Letters: A Journey Through Switzerland and Italy* (1996). Here, perceptions of Zurich are pretty much the usual ("Where is their passion? ... They only have passion for banknotes, and even that's not passion, it's lust."), but change for Ticino, which is seen as a perfect balance between north and south and described as "Arcadia with Swiss plumbing". Switzerland is no longer a same-all-over blob; it has different parts – and the plumbing's good! It's a start, anyway.

This reporter was struck by a later book, *Eleven Minutes* (2003), by Brazilian author Paulo Coelho – not a writer in English, to be sure, although that is the language millions of his best-selling books are likely to be read in.

Coelho too straddles old clichés about Switzerland, but also offers glimmers of a changed understanding in his portrayal of a middle-aged Swiss woman named (what else?) Heidi. She literally comes down off a mountain by train and finds herself chatting with a fellow traveller, a foreign writer. Attracted, she very uncharacteristically checks into a Geneva hotel room with him for an afternoon of lovemaking during which she discovers her orgasmic potential for the first time before returning home to her nice but sexually uninspiring Swiss husband. Heidi is not the protagonist of Coelho's tale, but this doesn't detract from the symbolism: Heidi, the little Swiss mountain girl of Johanna Spyri's 19th-century story, growing up at last!

When will we be able to say the same of foreign observers, or at least their perceptions, of Switzerland?

Further reading: *La Suisse vue par les écrivains de langue anglaise* (Switzerland as seen by writers of the English language) by Patrick Vincent, Lausanne 2009
www.lesavoirsuisse.ch