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Book Review: The Gilded Chalet: Off-Piste in Literary Switzerland

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Padraig Rooney. *The Gilded Chalet: Off-Piste in Literary Switzerland*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing: London and Boston, 2015. ISBN-978-85788-636-8. Hardcover. 20 pounds sterling.

In *The Gilded Chalet*, Irish author Padraig Rooney gives the reader a fascinating account of Switzerland from the perspectives of geography, history, and literature. In the process, Switzerland emerges as a space that had much to offer literati and other creative spirits from antiquity through the twentieth century. Switzerland, under Rooney's pen, becomes a retreat from the workaday world and one supposes from the machinations of grubby capitalism. The writers it attracted needed to earn a living, to be sure, but one does not sense in them the greed that is ubiquitous throughout capitalism.

A sprawling, prolix book, *The Gilded Chalet* does not yield a thesis that is easy to summarize unless it be that Switzerland has for centuries been Europe's refuge from writers from other parts of Europe and the United States. Along the way, especially in the introduction, one learns about the author, and the book is partly a story of his personal journey of self-discovery as an Irish writer seeking sanctuary in Switzerland.

The Gilded Chalet has much to recommend. As a piece of stylistic virtuosity, the book's prose is by turns vigorous and contemplative. Rooney's knowledge of Europe—Switzerland in particular—is nearly encyclopedic in its coverage of several branches of knowledge. *The Gilded Chalet* is literary history that becomes much more than a mere recitation of great works. Rooney does well to concentrate on several of the most seminal writers, many of them twentieth century masters like James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Mann, and Herman Hesse, finding insights in their craft. At the same time he rightly gives space to some of the major Nobel laureates in literature. Again Hemingway, Mann and Hesse come to mind. All are united by the fact that for a time they lived and wrote in Switzerland even if the country was not their native land. In this way Rooney makes clear that Switzerland serves as a magnet to attract the iron of literary talent in Europe and the United

States. Writers came to Switzerland, which served as their refuge and muse. Arresting photographs, including pictures of tuberculosis convalescents at a Swiss sanitarium and nude men about to exercise at a spa, accompany the text. One feels drawn back to the era of the Greek gymnasium with its nude athletes glistening with sweat. Switzerland apparently stimulated more than merely the pen.

Although Rooney introduces the reader to many seminal writers who dwelled for a time in Switzerland, he appears to have omitted at least one important voice, that of Friedrich Nietzsche. One hardly needs to emphasize that Nietzsche was just the type of character who would have fit well in this book. He spent his years as a professor of philology in Switzerland, but even after his early retirement due to illness, Nietzsche returned periodically to Switzerland even as he traveled restlessly throughout Europe in search of the ideal climate. Nietzsche merited inclusion in *The Gilded Chalet* because of the power of his ideas and the felicitous way in which he expressed them.

By the same token, Rooney seems to have confined himself to writers of particular literary merit. One might have broadened this category to include the most gifted mathematicians and scientists, whose writings always enlighten. One thinks here of Albert Einstein, who as a clerk at the Swiss Patent Office penned four epochal papers in 1905, his miracle year. These four papers did as much and perhaps more than any other writings in giving birth to modern physics. These papers on special relativity, the photoelectric effect, Brownian motion, and other aspects of quantum and atomic theories remain classics today. Einstein too merited inclusion in *The Gilded Chalet*.

Another challenge to the reader is the title because one does not emerge from the book with a clear understanding of the adjective “gilded.” Rooney does not seem to have had in mind Mark Twain’s meaning for gilded in the gilded age as a period of conspicuous consumption, unequal distribution of wealth, and unethical behavior. Something more is at work here, but it is difficult to determine what. Finally, *The Gilded Chalet* reads like an insider’s perspective of literary history because Rooney tends to supply only the last name of authors. This approach may make sense in the cases of Hemingway

and Fitzgerald, who will be familiar to an American audience, but John Polidori will likely be familiar only to devotees of vampire literature.

~ *Christopher Cumo*