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Book Review: History of the Swiss Watch Industry: From Jacques David to Nicolas Hayek

Victoria M. Breting-Garcia
Independent Scholar

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History of the Swiss Watch Industry: From Jacques David to Nicolas Hayek. Second Edition. Translated by Pierre-Yves Donzé and Richard Watkins (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers).

“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!” So began Lewis Carroll’s nineteenth century literary classic, *Alice in Wonderland*. Now celebrating its 150th year of publication, the story introduced the beloved white rabbit, in waist-coat, appearing on the edge of a hedge, peering anxiously at a pocket watch. As a young graduate research assistant at the University of Neuchâtel in 2002, Pierre-Yves Donzé was intrigued by the vitality of the watchmaking industry. Like Alice, he followed the pink-eyed rabbit down the burrows of time to unlock the curious story of the Swiss watch industry since 1800.

Donzé’s *History of the Swiss Watch Industry: From Jacques David to Nicolas Hayek*, takes place along the timeless string of northwestern cantons bordering Switzerland, snugly situated within the Jura Mountains. Geneva established itself as a prominent center of production in the 16th century, following the prosperous lead of London, Paris, and southern Germany. From Geneva, talented craftsmen migrated into the mountains, establishing a unique industry that thrives to the present day. Master planners still marvel at the ingenious principles that guided the sustainable development of a resilient industry that set and continues to hold the gold standard in markets worldwide. Known for the enduring pursuit of exquisite craftsmanship and relentless technical finesse, in 2009 UNESCO awarded La Chaux-de-Fonds / Le Locle for joint recognition in the World Heritage Program, preserving for posterity the legacy of their watchmaking town planning and best practices.

At the time that Carroll wrote his *Wonderland* classic, the United States was transitioning into a period of post-Civil War reconstruction, soon becoming one of Switzerland’s major importers of Swiss watches at a value that rose from 8.5 million Swiss francs in 1864 to more than 18 million in 1872 (Donzé 20). The transcontinental railroad was completed on May 10, 1869, connecting the United States to prosperous markets along the Pacific and Atlantic seaboard. Time management was essential, and the Gregorian calendar quickly became the standard for international trade. *The Observatoire Cantonal de*

Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel Observatory), also known as the *Observatoire Astronomique et Chronométrique de Neuchâtel*, was founded in 1858 to assess the accuracy of mechanical timepieces, particularly for marine navigation. Later, the Greenwich meridian was adopted by the International Meridian Conference of 1884 as local timetables became standardized worldwide.

Fire destroyed the twin cities of La-Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle in 1794. Reconstruction soon followed, modeled on the city grid street system popular in the United States. Buildings uniformly face south to maximize natural light for watch and clockmaking. Homes and manufactures were interwoven to create an urban matrix uniquely suited for stable, local family cottage industries that created the foundations of a proto-industrial production system known as *établissage*, thus preserving the nucleus of the artisanal industry to the present day. A traditional business environment slowly took root, one that favored the local concentration of technical know-how and expertise supported by well-established commercial networks and merchants throughout Europe and the Americas eager to invest in new products. Initially, rural watchmaking served as an additional source of income during long winter months. During the nineteenth century the American system of manufacturing, particularly the manufacture of standardized parts by machine, had a profound effect on the organization and distribution of the fledgling Swiss industry.

It is against the backdrop of these evolving global paradigms that Donzé reconstructed the phases of development that determined the foundations of the Swiss watch industry. His introduction provides the early beginnings of the European watch industry. Next he synthesized the complex narrative of the industry's integration into the factory system of production, highlighting the emergence of a dual model that created strong, interdependent working relationships among traditional workshops and newer mechanical systems. The Swiss entry into standardized production models enabled the industry to participate in the rapid production of reliable, inexpensive watch parts and timepieces ideally suited for the harried schedules of a rapidly growing urban labor pool.

Deeply rooted in the time-honored traditions of the watch making industry, during the twentieth century the Swiss watch network developed strategies and self-organizing systems stretched

along a horizontal production axis to meet the challenges of local and global innovation; later, going into the 21st century the same consortium reconfigured itself for a vertical array of goods and services that once again created new markets in luxury craftsmanship. Mass communications systems, organized capitalism, the adoption of minimum sale prices, the practice of *chamblonnage* (the export of interchangeable parts), the influence of internal cartel networks, and the protections provided by government and financial organizations provided valuable interventions that stimulated the drive for new markets and products. Donzé's first publication set the stage for its sequel, *A Business History of the Swatch Group: The Rebirth of Swiss Watchmaking and the Globalization of the Luxury Industry* (2014).

In 2011 Pierre-Yves Donzé received the prestigious Gaia Award from the International Museum of Watchmaking at La Chaux-de-Fonds. His published works may be found at <https://sites.google.com/site/pydonze/research>. He is a current member of academia.edu. <https://osaka-u.academia.edu/PierreYvesDonz%C3%A9>

~ *Victoria M. Breting-Garcia*
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