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Book Review: Slow Train to Switzerland

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Book Reviews

Diccon Bewes. *Slow Train to Switzerland* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2014). ISBN: 978-1-85788-625-2 Paperback \$19.95

The genre of travel writing includes works on many subjects. Some have been written to denigrate the population of the area discussed. Others are written to glorify a region for its beauty or quaintness. Such optimistic treatments often ignore the negative features of society and focus on stereotypes. Also, authors often try to create a new view of the area described.

Diccon Bewes established himself as one of the best travel writers on Switzerland, when he burst onto the scene in 2012 with his retrospective of the Helvetian Confederation *Swiss Watching: Inside the Land of Milk and Money*. His most recent book deals with Thomas B. Cook's creation of winter tourism and how this has changed Switzerland. In *Slow Train to Switzerland*, Bewes retraces the steps of the first British tourists to arrive in Switzerland and who were accompanied by Cook. Bewes retraces the steps of the first tour of Switzerland conducted by Thomas Cook in 1863.

In this effort, Bewes uses the book *Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal* by an English lady. This diary is a captivating look at Switzerland long before the tourists had inundated the nation. Miss Jemima records a time when the Alps were just beginning to be seen not as a nuisance but as a potential winter playground for the English. Through her Victorian-era eyes, the reader sees a very different Switzerland than today. Bewes embarks on a modern-day tour of Switzerland, not with Thomas Cook, but with Miss Jemima as his guide.

As Bewes retraces the steps of this tour, and he offers insights into the change in scenery, lifestyle and ease of travel from that time to now. Much is made about the great influx of tourists into places such as Chamonix, Leukerbad, Bern and Mount Pilatus. No criticism of the rapid climate change is mentioned when comparing the glaciers of the 1860s to those of today. A particularly lengthy portion of the book deals with the Jungfrau Massif and the major changes tourism has brought to that area.

A most effective portion of the book deals with the arrival of the famous Swiss trains. The discussion focuses on the transformation from relatively crude railways to the smooth and ultra-efficiently running SBB/CFF trains of today. Bewes describes attempts to establish order in Switzerland and tame the mountains. In fact, this analogy is an important theme for the entire book. He admonishes the reader to slow down and enjoy the simpler things of life.

This book is well written, easily followed, and the history is well researched. At times Bewes' prose is a little unwieldy because some of his asides are irreverent and distract from the major themes of the book. Despite these small issues, this book is a fine addition to the canon of travel literature on Switzerland. *Slow Train to Switzerland* should be considered as an alternative to Lonely Planet Guidebooks or other travel guides.

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