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Book Review: Swiss Watching: Inside the Land of Milk and Money

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“Watching the Swiss” A review of Diccon Bewes’ *Swiss Watching: Inside the Land of Milk and Money* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2012).

Many moons ago when I was still a dewy-eyed college student experiencing Smith College’s Junior Year Abroad Geneva program, the day we all waited for was *le jour du débarras*, the day of the storeroom. On this day, Smith students would enter a treasure trove of goodies left behind by previous students: pots and pans, blankets and pillows, lamps, French-English dictionaries with the plastic still on, skis, hiking boots, fondue pots and raclette makers. In that room was everything a student abroad in Switzerland could possibly want. What wasn’t there was what we really needed: a guide to the Swiss themselves. Sure, there were guidebooks to Switzerland revealing information about cozy hotels and museums, eclectic snippets of history and managing exchange rates. What those books did not explain were those truly confounding manners of the Swiss, local politics, how history related to daily practice. We needed to understand what made the Swiss tick. This is where Diccon’s *Swiss Watching* would have resolved our problems.

As Bewes observes, Switzerland is a real island in the heart of Europe. There is no other country with nine official names, four national languages, 7.5 million people but only 80 percent of them part of the ethnic majority. Switzerland is a land of particularism and yet, a microcosm of all that is Europe. Bewes observes that Switzerland is both what you see and its contradiction.

If your only knowledge of history and international law came from war films, you would at least know that the Geneva Conventions are good things . . . And after watching Steve McQueen trying to jump the border fence on a motorcycle or the Von Trapps walking over the hills, you’d also know that Switzerland is the safest place to be in wartime. But the world is not as simple as Hollywood. War and peace are not black and white, or in German *schwarz* and *weiss*; combine the two and you get *Schweiz*, the German for Switzerland. How apt for a country that lives in that grey area of armed neutrality, striving for peace but preparing for war.

Of course, the book decodes the obvious stereotypes about punctuality, chocolate, yodeling and cheese. For those in French-speaking Switzerland, some of the references will seem a bit odd. Bewes point of reference is clearly German-Switzerland as the dominant model.

This sometimes hilarious examination of Swiss life does some interesting things very well. First, it decodes practices of every day life and provides historic and cultural context for Swiss behaviors.

Nested in every chapter, there is a mini-guide to Swiss manners and practices. For example, no foreigner could know the Swiss custom of greeting properly at a party, introducing himself to each and every person and saying the name of each of the guests and bidding adieu in the opposite order. Bewes' explanation is a perfect recipe for not insulting your hosts. The mini-guide on politics is less well-designed. Granted, Swiss voting practices are neither obvious nor easy to explain. Bewes does an admirable job of deciphering the rounds of votes, but leaves the reader still needing a scorecard. Comparisons are made to British experiences. Without a solid grounding in British ways, it might be hard to follow all of the chapters.

Bewes' disdain for religion permeates the book. At times, his irreverent approach is illuminating, as it is when he discusses relationships between churches. Since wars of religion played such an important role in the forming of Switzerland, this insight is keen. Other times, he is condescending. The tone may be more appropriate for Continental tastes on secularism than for American readers and certainly, American classrooms.

Bewes does not shy from dealing with potentially hot, timely political topics, including the evolution of the Swiss banking industry. He returns frequently to economics, discussing the changing environment for the Gnomes of Basel to Holocaust Banking scandals. The section on the 2011 leaked data scandal where a cd passed to government officials threatened to catch thousands of people for tax evasion and secret bank accounts reads more like a Grisham novel than travel book.

This book was a fine read for a snowy afternoon when I longed for hiking, skiing and crafting a pot of fondue with friends. What was missing at my old table? Some Swiss! Perhaps if I had had this guide then, I might have known better how to make friends with them.

Robin A. Horvath