



# Swiss American Historical Society Review

---

Volume 45 | Number 1

Article 5

---

2009

## Book Review

Christian D. Nokkentved Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs\\_review](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review)



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nokkentved, Christian D. Ph.D. (2009) "Book Review," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Vol. 45 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs\\_review/vol45/iss1/5](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol45/iss1/5)

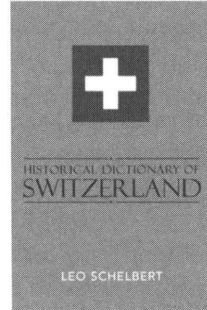
This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swiss American Historical Society Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## Book Review

Leo Schelbert. *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland*. Historical Dictionaries of Europe, No. 53. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007.

In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), Voltaire wrote, “Happy Helvetia! To what charter do you owe your liberty? To your courage, to your resolution, to your mountains...Why is liberty so rare? Because it is the chiefest [sic] good.”<sup>3</sup> Voltaire, clearly, knew about Switzerland, its politics and culture, and he is neither the first nor the last to see Switzerland as an exemplar. Voltaire, a Frenchman, is, of course, not mentioned in the work reviewed here, but another Enlightenment figure, known to Voltaire and us, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is. In fact, we learn that he was born in Geneva, was apprenticed there to an engraver, and not until an adult did he move to Paris. Later in life he again spent years of exile, so to speak, in his native land. We further learn that apart from his works on philosophy, Rousseau also wrote on music and botany. Voltaire and Rousseau indicate that the area we today call Switzerland played an integral part in the history of Europe during the time of the Enlightenment, and it has done so since before its earliest days as a medieval state, just as it continues to do to this day. Unfortunately, it seems that on this side of the Atlantic we tend to think of Europe as consisting of just the big three or four: i.e. the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and perhaps Italy.

The Swiss, in Schelbert’s view, “...have been and remain significantly involved in European as well as global affairs.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Jon Woronoff, editor of the series, wrote about Switzerland in the “Editor’s Foreword” that, “...it is definitely a place one should know more about.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many of the volumes in this series of historical dictionaries have clearly taken on this task of delineating the histories of European nations less familiar to us. For example, number 52 is the second edition of *Moldavia* and number 33 is about Denmark. It should be noted that, while Schelbert is a lifelong scholar, this dictionary is not written just for scholars. Indeed,



<sup>3</sup> “Helvetia

<sup>4</sup> Schelbert, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., ix.

Schelbert states that he wrote for, in his words, "...descendants of Swiss abroad, and...persons in business, journalism, or diplomacy who are looking for some compact data bout Switzerland from a historical perspective."<sup>6</sup>

To assist the reader, this work contains much useful information in addition to what is in the dictionary part itself. Besides the "Foreword" and "Preface," the front matter includes four maps, an 18 page "Chronology" of Swiss history, and an even longer introductory essay giving a sketch of modern Switzerland, its history and culture. All of this occupies some eighty pages. After the dictionary section, the volume concludes with an additional 117 pages of useful appendices and an extensive bibliography.

The "Chronology" is organized by era, beginning with 130,000 BCE and the oldest evidence of human habitation in the Alpine regions. The very last entry records that in September of 2006, "67.7 percent of the Swiss voters accepted a controversial asylum law, with a 48.2 percent voter turnout."<sup>7</sup> In between are listed key events of the intervening years. We read, for example, that the Romans built the first road across the Gotthard Pass in 47 CD, and by 401 they had pulled their legions south of the Alps leaving the Gallo-Romans to fend for themselves as various peoples from the north and east slowly moved into the area. Christianity came to dominate the region in the sixth century and in the Reformation split Swiss society, beginning in 1523 with Huldrych Zwingli's work and the reactions to it. Already in 1291, as most with even a vague awareness of Swiss history will know, the three year league of Uri and Schwyz and Unterwalden began the process that would lead to the formation of modern Switzerland. Of course, as the chronology indicates, it required a great deal of politics, many treaties and wars between 1291 and the twenty-six day Sonderbund civil war in 1847 to establish the state we know as Switzerland. While the country avoided fighting a war after 1847, and is now known for its stand of neutrality in international relations, both internal and international politics have continued to this day. One might mention here that in the twentieth century, World War II probably presented the most difficult challenges to the people and government of Switzerland. The main dates are mentioned in the chronology and the introduction devotes almost two pages to the war, but for the full story one must go to other works, for example *Switzerland under Siege 1939–1945* (2000) edited by Schelbert.

When one thinks of Switzerland, the Alps, banks, direct democracy, and William Tell are what most often leap to mind. This incomplete picture is succinctly filled in and corrected by the introductory essay. To be sure the Alps dominate the landscape, but most Swiss live and work in the valleys. The service industries, especially banking and tourism, are replacing

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

manufacturing and agriculture as the dominant economic sector, and the Swiss are becoming increasingly urban. After the Second World War, the Swiss established the kind of welfare-state common in Western Europe, with the income support which that system provides now going to the so-called working poor, especially single mothers, and others working in the service sector. It is no longer accurate to describe the Swiss political system as a direct democracy, but political power remains based on the communes. Representative assemblies play an increasing role as the population grows, but plebiscites remain important and local autonomy persists, and in some locales direct democracy continues. Given the nature of this book, it is not surprising that the section on history is the longest. Here Schelbert has constructed a narrative that largely expands on the terse list of events in the chronology. However, we must wait for the entry on William Tell in the dictionary part to learn that he was most likely a mythical figure, even if his story still exerts significant influence in the Swiss sense of identity.

The dictionary, indeed, includes an entry on William Tell and much else besides. In the "Preface" Schelbert writes that, "...the biographical entries...focus on people whose activities reached beyond national boundaries."<sup>8</sup> While not mentioned in this work, the William Tell story certainly reached far beyond Switzerland. It inspired Schiller's famous play which in turn inspired Rossini's opera (1829), of which the overture is especially well known, and there was an earlier opera by André Gretry (1791). Moreover, an astonishing number of American children know the story of William Tell's arrow hitting the apple on his son's head. This is not, however, a biographical dictionary, and the persons chosen to be included, or not, can at times seem arbitrary. For example, those who do not know Professor Schelbert might wonder why Mari Sandoz would be included. On the other hand, few would ask why others like Paracelsus (he was born in the canton Schwyz), Ernest Bloch, Zwingli, or Rousseau for that matter, are included. In any event it is clear that most of the choices were guided by the book's intended audience, and on the whole the selections make sense, at least to this writer.

The core of the dictionary is formed by, as Schelbert writes, "Sketches of the 26 cantons and their capitals."<sup>9</sup> These and the other geographical entries are all in the well established format of a gazetteer. A format, one might mention, old enough to be famously lampooned by H. Heinz in *Die Harzreise* (1826), wherein he described Göttingen as famous for its sausages and university, as having 999 fireplaces and various other institutions including a "Ratskeller, wo das Bier sehr gut ist."<sup>10</sup> Schelbert has, however, done his work carefully and never exhibits the pedantry to

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Die Harzreise* (Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam, 1984), 5.

which Heine so objected. In fact, a great deal of the history is included in these geographical entries. For example, Appenzell, first mentioned in the documents in 1071, was one canton until 1597, when the Reformation led to its division into a Catholic Appenzell-Innerrhoden and a Protestant Appenzell-Ausserrhoden. The disputes continued off and on until the constitution of 1876 formally separated religion and politics. Catholicism remained the religion of the people in canton Ticino, though since the mid-tenth century they have followed not the Roman but the Milanese rite. The main valley serves as one of the major north-south routes which has, over the years, made the canton attractive to various powers, leading to much conflict in the area. Furthermore Ticino had, until the twentieth century, remained relatively homogeneous in language and culture and continues to be the center of *italianità*. Again and again in these entries we find references to political and later even national coherence despite these doctrinal, linguistic and cultural differences. It is undoubtedly this heterogeneity that has made Switzerland such a beacon to the forces of liberty and toleration in the rest of the world.

There are other types of entries in this dictionary on a variety of special topics, including those about major corporations, other institutions and events. Some of them are worthy of reading for their own sake. The entries on the “Reformation” and “Religion”, for example, are succinct and incisive. Here Schelbert reminds us how intimately religion and politics were connected in the past. On the other hand, canton Appenzell was split in two and did not find the legal basis for separating politics and religion until 1876, there were wars pitting Swiss, sometimes even in alliance with outsiders, against Swiss, and yet the country ultimately remained one. We tend to think of immigration as people moving to the United States and emigration as people leaving other continents. In two pithy entries, “Emigration” and “Immigration,” Schelbert effectively places migration into an historical context. For example, he begins “Emigration” with the words, “People in regions of present-day Switzerland have been on the move ever since humans have settled there. Once the nation had been formed by 1515, its citizens looked for occupational and settlement opportunities abroad.”<sup>11</sup> Nor is migration to Europe just a late twentieth, early twenty-first century phenomenon. As the beginning of “Immigration” reminds us, “Although figures are only sporadically available, newcomers from abroad have arrived in regions of present-day Switzerland since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>12</sup> There are many other entries that all deserve special mention, but let the above suffice.

The volume ends with a number of useful sections. The ten appendices, all in tabular form, include major place name equivalents in the four official

---

<sup>11</sup> Schelbert, 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

languages of Switzerland, population statistics, characteristics of each canton's population, places of origin for immigrants and settlement of emigrants, and so on. The last and most interesting addendum, however, is the bibliography. It should be noted that this bibliography is not meant to indicate the sources for the dictionary; indeed there is no scholarly apparatus at all, but is rather intended for those who wish to pursue any one topic in more detail. That Schelbert is a scholar shows most clearly here. The bibliography begins with a table of contents on page 445 and ends on page 527. It is carefully arranged in sections and subsections, beginning with a short introductory essay. Then general works like official administrative websites, lexica and serials are listed, followed by a section of works about geography, demography, the economy, society, politics and culture. The fourth, last and, not surprisingly, longest section includes works on history. While some primary materials in print are included, most are of a secondary nature, and most are of recent publication. It is interesting to note that a large majority of the sources listed throughout are in German, though works in English, French and Italian are also represented as are a few in Reto-Romansh. Like the rest of this dictionary this bibliography is carefully constructed and easy to use.

Schelbert's *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland* can certainly be counted as an eminently useful reference work. It is not, however, just for "...descendants of Swiss abroad, and...persons in business, journalism, or diplomacy....," as Schelbert suggests, though such persons would certainly find much of interest here. Anyone interested in the history of Europe would do well to consult works like the dictionary at hand. One cautionary note is, however, necessary. In this age of the internet it seems odd that we so often let the computer get in the way of making decent maps, when computer assisted cartography can do so much. This writer finds, however, that too often maps in contemporary publications of all kinds are so oversimplified and of such a low resolution as to be nearly useless, if not misleading. Compare the maps in Karl Baedeker's guide for travelers to Switzerland from 1909, for instance, with those in the dictionary reviewed here; the former show what can be done and the latter leave much to be desired. In addition there are the odd and unavoidable minor, minor errors here and there. That caveat aside this is clearly a work of a dedicated and knowledgeable writer, a work of love even, and well worth using and even acquiring.

*Christian D. Nøkkentved, Ph.D.*  
*The Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy*