CHAPTER I

Why Switzerland?

'Why Switzerland?' is really two questions not one. The first is the understandable question which any English-speaking reader who picks up a book on Switzerland must ask: 'Why should I read about Switzerland, when there are so many other things to read about?' The second, less obvious question is why there is a Switzerland at all. The present chapter will try to answer the former question; the whole book is devoted to the latter. What you have in your hands is not a guidebook. You will not find places to eat in Solothurn nor the height of the Matterhorn here. It is not a conventional history. The chapter called 'History' starts in the middle, goes backward in time and only after that does it proceed in the usual way. It is not journalism either, although most of the raw material which has been worked into the argument is drawn from our own day. If it has any clear claim to be any specific category of literature, I suppose that *Why Switzerland?* is a latter-day version of those eighteenth-century philosophical histories in which the thinkers of the Enlightenment thought they discerned underlying laws. It is a history in the way that Dr Johnson thought of history, 'contrary to minute exactness, a history which ranges facts according to their dependence on each other, and postpones or anticipates according to the convenience of narration'.[1]

If the book is odd, so is its subject. There is no place like Switzerland and hence any attempt to catch its meaning must be pretty odd too. The sheer variety of Swiss life, what I think of as its 'cellular' character, makes it hard to write a coherent account of the place. Then there are the various institutions, habits and customs unique to Switzerland: its unbelievably complicated electoral procedures, its referenda and initiatives, its specialised economy with its banks and watches, its cheese and chocolates, its citizen-soldiers with their guns in the downstairs cupboards, its complicated

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federalism of central government, cantons and communes, its three official and four national languages, its neutral status, its astonishing wealth per head, its huge proportion of foreign workers, its efficient public services, its enormous number of very small newspapers, its religious divisions, and until February 1971 its exclusion of women from the vote on the federal level. That is an impressive list of oddities for a country of only six million souls. But there is more.

In a world shaken by industrial unrest, Switzerland has been an island of labour peace. During 1974, there were six industrial disputes, three of which led to strikes of a day or more. The total number of days lost was 2,777. In Great Britain during the same year, the figure was 14.7 million. Nor was 1974 unusual in Swiss labour relations. The *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Schweiz 1995* reports that between 1975 and 1993 there was a grand total of twenty-seven strikes or lockouts which lasted for at least twenty-four hours or more, or just under three a year. In 1987 and 1993 there were no strikes at all and in 1986 and 1991 only one. The worst year for disputes was 1980 when five strikes and 330 firms were involved, costing 5,718 lost days of work.[2] A modern state which had done nothing else but achieve a truce in the battle between employer and employee would deserve close attention for that accomplishment alone.

Most people know that Switzerland is a country of many languages. There are in fact four national languages: German, French, Italian and Raeto-Romansch. The first three are official languages, which means that all official documents, railway time-tables or postal notices must be published in each. According to the 1990 census, 63.6% of the population speak German, 19.2% French, 7.5% Italian, 0.6% Romansch and 8.9% 'other languages'.[3] The operation of a country so constituted would be fascinating enough if that were the whole story. The reality is much more complicated, indeed bewilderingly so. Here are some facts about language in Switzerland. The 40,000 people who speak Romansch as mother-tongue divide into those who speak the Ladino of the Upper Engadin and that of the Lower Engadin – each of which has its own written language – the Surselva of the Upper Rhine valley also with a literary tradition, and the non-literary dialects of Surmeirisch and Sutselvisch. The 63.6% who speak 'German' are actually bilingual, for they speak a language they do not read or write, and read and

write in a language which they sometimes speak but not as a mother-tongue. The language of the Swiss Germans, *Schwyzerdütsch*, divides itself into almost as many versions as there are valleys in the Alps, some of which, such as those of the Bernese Oberland and Oberwallis, are incomprehensible to most *Schwyzerdütsch* speakers. There is one canton, Ticino, where Italian is the official language and another, Graubünden, in which three valleys and a few communes also use it as the official tongue. What sort of Italian? Let me cite a passage from Fritz René Allemann's *25 mal die Schweiz*, where he describes the village of Bivio in Canton Graubünden:

The census of 1960 recorded a total of 188 inhabitants for Bivio . . . with an Italian majority (it is the only commune north of the main chain of the Alps which belongs to the Italian linguistic area), an old-established Raeto-Romansch minority and also some German enclaves, with a Catholic and a Protestant Church, which have co-existed in 'parity' for centuries. (Both pastors look at the congregation first before deciding which language to preach in.) But that is not all. If one listens closely, one can hear three different dialects of Italian: the native dialect which is closely related to the Raetolombardic used in the Bregaglia; the Bergamasco dialect spoken by shepherd families who during the centuries wandered over the Alps from Northern Italy; and written, 'High', Italian.[4]

Religious divisions cut deeply into Swiss life. As Urs Altermatt puts it, until recently Swiss Roman Catholics lived in a ghetto. There were Catholic bookshops, Catholic employment offices and Catholic old people's homes:

A Catholic might be born in a Catholic hospital, attend Catholic schools from kindergarten to university, read Catholic newspapers and magazines, vote for the Catholic party and take part in Catholic clubs or associations. It was not unusual for a Catholic to insure himself against sickness or accident with a Catholic company and put his savings in a Catholic savings bank.[5]

Even the Swiss Constitution played a part in making Swiss Catholics feel themselves to be second-class citizens by forbidding Jesuits to live and work in the country. The provision was altered by referendum in May 1973.

Here then are three bits of Swiss reality, chosen more or less randomly from the thickets of Helvetic oddity. They seem to point in entirely different directions. There is evidently a national pattern in labour relations. All Swiss shun the strike, not just Swiss

Germans or Swiss Catholics. Yet the other evidence illustrates the extreme particularism, the divisions within divisions or the 'cellular' quality of Swiss life. How can a place so varied have national behaviour patterns? How are the complex layers of identity (language, region, creed, party, class, occupation, age) reconciled in Swiss heads? These seem to me to be interesting questions which in a way hold up a mirror to our own less dramatic equivalents.

Switzerland is a useful place to look at some other European problems. It is small enough to be studied conveniently, odd enough to be an abbreviation for the whole of European life and advanced enough to be fully integrated into all the trends of the era. In looking at the way the Swiss cope with mass culture, modern transportation, technological change, inflation, urbanisation, population growth, secularisation, environmental pollution and violence by extremist groups, we can see in a small arena what faces Europe in the large one. Can the 'Swissness' of Switzerland adapt to the great levelling trends of the time? If it can, there is reason to hope that the Europe of the twenty-first century will not have doused national characteristics in bureaucratic grey. Particular identity will still be the essential feature of European identity, as the particularity of Switzerland is its most striking general characteristic.

The oddest thing about Switzerland is how little most foreigners know about it. No country is more frequently visited but less known. Switzerland has two faces, the smooth, expressionless, efficient surface which the tourist glides by without noticing and the turbulent, rich, inside surface which he or she never sees. The average English-speaking person, if asked to choose a few adjectives to describe Switzerland, would probably end up with a list containing the following: 'beautiful', 'efficient', 'expensive' and 'boring'. The last one crops up so frequently that I find myself shrieking 'Switzerland *is* interesting' over and over again, just to be heard. I know that Switzerland is in many ways a fascinating country but, if I mention the word 'Swiss', eyes glaze and attention wanders. In a lecture course on European history of the nineteenth century, I once announced that I intended to devote the next lecture to the Swiss civil war, and halved my audience. Not only will a Swiss question never 'come up' in an examination but even a civil war, if it happened in Switzerland, cannot be interesting.
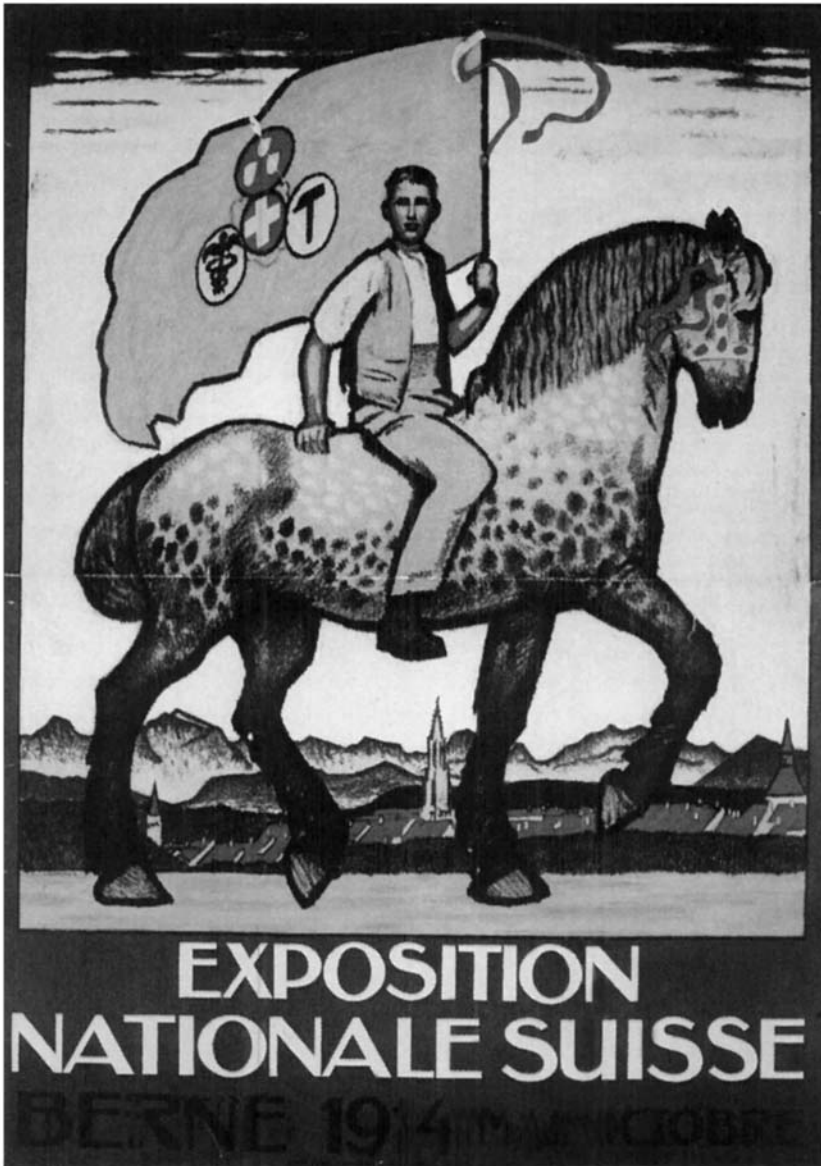
Plate 1 Poster for the Exposition nationale suisse, 1914

Part of this is sheer prejudice, and not new either. In 1797 the exiled French aristocrat Chateaubriand observed bitterly: 'Neutral in the grand revolutions of the states which surround them, they enrich themselves by the misfortunes of others and found a bank on human calamities.'[6] The following year French troops swept away the old Swiss Confederation and the Swiss revolution began. Chateaubriand should have waited a little. Like so many foreigners he was tempted to generalise because Switzerland sometimes seems changeless. How many of those who say flatly that nothing ever happens in Switzerland would recognise this picture of the country, taken from a letter of Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, in 1845?

Switzerland presents the most perfect image of a state in the process of social disintegration . . . Switzerland stands alone today in Europe as a republic and serves troublemakers of every sort as a free haven. Instead of improving its situation by appropriate means, the Confederation staggers from evils into upheavals and represents for itself and for its neighbours an inexhaustible spring of unrest and disturbance.[7]

Another reason why Switzerland is unknown abroad is that it is hard to know. Centuries of tourism have left a mark. The Swiss simply do not reveal themselves easily to foreigners. An alien can live in some Swiss cities for years and never be invited to a Swiss home. Geneva is notorious for this but not unique. There are barriers everywhere to easy contact. It is also hard to know intel-lectually. There are so many puzzles and difficulties. Take the problem of frontiers. How does an artificial line drawn through a continuous stretch of countryside or marked on a bridge make everything change: table silver, foods, smells, customs, appearance of the buildings and so on? For the frontier watcher, Switzerland is a paradise. Cross the language border in Canton Fribourg (this is one not even marked by an outward sign) on the road from Bern to the city of Fribourg, and the streets become dirtier, and the window boxes of flowers less frequent. It is Francophone territory. Why are French-speaking communities less neat than German-speaking ones? Travel the road from Biel–Bienne to Porrentruy (all French-speaking) and watch the 'Jura libre' slogans painted on walls appear and disappear as the car passes from Catholic to Protestant com-munity and back again. How can one make sense of the invisible barriers which seem to divide otherwise identical settlements? The

Plate 2 The ski resort of Sörenberg

answers to such questions are extremely difficult to devise; it is not always clear what the question is. Understanding Switzerland is so hard that few ever try.

There are modest satisfactions for those who do, and I hope that you will end up sharing my delight in the variety and exuberance of Swiss life, as I try to sketch it for you. There are also some grander rewards for anybody who takes the case of Switzerland seriously, as Dr Johnson pointed out:

Let those who despise the capacity of the Swiss, tell us by what wonderful policy or by what happy conciliation of interests, it is brought to pass, that in a body made up of different communities and different religions, there should be no civil commotions, though the people are so warlike, that to nominate and raise an army is the same.[8]

CHAPTER 2

History

Switzerland has no natural frontiers. The mountains and valleys of
the Alps continue to the east and west into what is now Austria and
France as they do on the southern slopes into what is now Italy.
That the Bregaglia and the valley of Poschiavo are Swiss, while the
Valtellina or the county of Bormio are Italian, can only be under-
stood historically. Every Swiss frontier represents an historic act or
set of events. Vorarlberg is Austrian because the Great Powers in
1919 refused to accept a plebiscite of its people for union with
Switzerland. Geneva's borders on Lac Léman were settled by the
Vienna Congress. Canton Ticino was conquered by Uri and later
by other Swiss cantons. Constance, the 'natural' capital of the
Thurgau, is German, partly because the Swiss Diet lacked the nerve
in 1510 to accept another city-state into the Federation for fear of
upsetting the urban–rural balance. Canton Schaffhausen contains
one parcel of 41 hectares in its midst which is, in fact, German
territory, and has three substantial enclaves, which cannot be
reached without passing through German territory. Nor is the
picture more coherent within Switzerland. Boundaries between
cantons wander irregularly and unexpectedly over the landscape.
Bits and pieces of Canton Solothurn lie embedded in Canton Bern,
two of which, Kleinlützel and Mariastein, have borders with France
as well. In Kleinlützel when people go shopping in one of the
neighbouring larger towns, they tend to say 'we're going up to
Switzerland'. Campione d'Italia on the eastern shore of Lago di
Lugano is a chip of Italy, precisely 2.1 kilometres long and just over
1 kilometre deep at its widest point. The territory, much of which is
actually lake surface, is entirely surrounded by the Swiss Canton
Ticino. The complex overlapping of political authority, the jagged
nonsense of frontiers and boundaries, the bits and pieces of
territory lying about the map, resemble a jigsaw puzzle constructed

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by a whimsical providence. Part of the key to the puzzle is what did
not happen in Switzerland, rather than what did. The Swiss escaped
the full consequences of three characteristic European trends: the
trend toward rational centralisation, the growth of nationalism and
the violence of religious conflict. Let us look at each in turn.

The French and their fellow travellers tried to make sense of
Switzerland in the period between 1798 and 1802. During those
years in Switzerland and other parts of Europe, the French installed
enlightened, rational, benevolent, centralised, puppet govern-
ments. The Helvetic Republic, as the Swiss version was called,
introduced the latest achievements of the French Revolution:
equality before the law, uniformity of weights and measures, and a
uniform code of justice. It liberated large tracts of subject territory
in Ticino, Vaud, Aargau and Thurgau and raised former subjects to
the dignity of citizens. The French and their supporters intended
to put an end to the fantastic array of tiny republics, prince–
bishoprics, princely abbeys, counties, free cities, sovereign cloisters
and monasteries, free valleys, overlapping jurisdictions, guilds,
oligarchies and city aristocracies. On 12 April 1798, Switzerland
received a new, modern constitution. Article 1 declared it to be 'a
unitary and indivisible Republic. There are no longer any borders
between cantons and formerly subject territories nor between
cantons.'[1]

The Swiss themselves had other ideas. At the time that unity was
being proclaimed, the formerly subject communities of the old
Confederation were asserting their diversity. In the area of the
modern Canton St Gallen alone, eight independent republics had
sprung up ranging in size from the Toggenburg valley with 50,000
citizens to the tiny republic of Sax with 1,000.[2] The mountain
cantons rejected the Helvetic Republic emphatically. Napoleon
needed stability along the approaches to the great Alpine passes,
and he saw the armed resistance of the Swiss as a military nuisance.
The Helvetic Republic existed on paper; the reality was chaos. In
1802 he summoned the representatives of the cantons and the
Helvetic Senate to Paris and, speaking to them as a man 'born in a
land of mountains who understands how mountain people think', he
charged them to work out a new constitution.[3]

These deliberations resulted in what was called the Act of
Mediation of 19 February 1803, which effectively restored political
sovereignty to the old cantons under a loose, federal constitution.

Napoleon, who had been much impressed by the *Landsgemeinden*, the popular assemblies of the mountain cantons, believed them to be the characteristic Swiss institution and insisted that they be restored. The *Landsgemeinden* were conservative but democratic, though not in the modern sense. Rousseau's 'general will' was not quite what emerged from the deliberations of the *Landsgemeinden* where *Praktizieren und Trölen* (electoral bribery and corruption) were the rule, and where the *Hintersässen* (residents who lacked full civic rights) had no vote at all but, if that was the system the mountaineers wanted, Napoleon was prepared to return it to them, together with traditional Swiss federalism. The *Mediationsverfassung*, the constitution which he proposed, elevated many of the previously subject or allied (*zugewandte*) territories to full cantonal equality, and St Gallen, Graubünden, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino and the Vaud took their places as full members of a federal union of nineteen cantons. Neuchâtel, which together with the prince–bishopric of Basel and the princely abbey of St Gallen had been one of the *zugewandte Monarchien* (allied monarchies) of the old Confederation, was not returned to it and, indeed, after the battle of Jena in 1806, Napoleon deposed the King of Prussia as Count of Neuchâtel-Valangin altogether. Geneva and the republic of Valais were annexed to France. Napoleon's intervention had paradoxical consequences. Elsewhere in Europe French armies swept aside petty sovereignties and abolished the lingering traces of 'feudalism'. In Switzerland they were preserved. Why were Swiss institutions tougher than those elsewhere in resisting French reforms?

Why was Switzerland not destroyed by another, more violent, child of the French Revolution, nationalism? Take the case of the Italian-speaking Canton Ticino, whose links to the Swiss began in 1478 when the German-speaking canton of Uri, the Gotthard Pass canton, annexed the Valle Leventina on the other side of the pass. The move brought both slopes approaching the Gotthard under one political authority and provided a base for further military expansion. Together with Schwyz and Nidwalden, the Urner extended their control during the following thirty years into the Riviera, Val Blenio and the city of Bellinzona, which remained under a tri-dominium of the three cantons until 1798. The rest of what is today Ticino, the cities of Lugano, Locarno, and the valleys around them, became joint property of twelve of the thirteen