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Wilhelm Oechsli
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HISTORY
OF
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HISTORY
OF
SWITZERLAND
1499–1914

BY

WILHELM OECHSLI

LATE PROFESSOR OF SWISS HISTORY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

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GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series is to sketch the history of Modern Europe, with that of its chief colonies and conquests, from about the end of the fifteenth century down to the present time. In one or two cases the story commences at an earlier date; in the case of the colonies it generally begins later. The histories of the different countries are described, as a rule, separately; for it is believed that, except in epochs like that of the French Revolution and Napoleon I, the connection of events will thus be better understood and the continuity of historical development more clearly displayed.

The series is intended for the use of all persons anxious to understand the nature of existing political conditions. 'The roots of the present lie deep in the past'; and the real significance of contemporary events cannot be grasped unless the historical causes which have led to them are known. The plan adopted makes it possible to treat the history of the last four centuries in considerable detail, and to embody the most important results of modern research. It is hoped therefore that the series will be useful not only to beginners but to students who have already acquired some general knowledge of European History. For those who wish to carry their studies further, the bibliography appended to each volume will act as a guide to original sources of information and works of a more special character.

Considerable attention is paid to political geography; and each volume is furnished with such maps and plans as may be requisite for the illustration of the text.

G. W. PROTHERO.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

HAD the author of this book lived to see its publication, he would naturally have written a preface, in which he would probably have said something about the circumstances in which the book came to be written. As he is, to the great regret of all fellow-historians, no longer alive, I may be pardoned if I take on myself, as editor, the task of acquainting the readers of the work with the most notable facts of his life.

Wilhelm Oeschli was born in October, 1851, at Riesbach, a suburb of Zurich. He came of a well-known middle-class family, long resident in that neighbourhood. His father was a builder. As a boy, he went to the Gymnasium of his native town, where he shewed an early taste for theology. On entering the University of Zurich, he continued that subject for a short time, but soon turned to the study of history, and eventually abandoned the idea of entering the Church. He attended the lectures of such notable teachers as Büdinger, Georg von Wyss, and Vögelin. While still a student he visited (in 1871) Leipzig, Berlin (where he sat at the feet of Theodor Mommsen), and Heidelberg. Returning to Zurich, he took his Doctorate in November 1873, his thesis dealing with a subject of Roman history. But his *Wanderjahre* were not yet over; and he made use of his temporary liberty to visit Paris, where he studied the history of the French Revolution in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and was specially concerned to trace the connection between the American revolutionary movement and the French. He did not carry these researches to a definite conclusion; but that he should have envisaged the subject shews not only the width of his interests, but also the philosophical bent of his mind. From Paris he paid short visits to England, Holland and Belgium. While in the French capital, he stood for the chair of German at the Collège Monge, and was selected, but gave up the post six months later on being appointed to a Professorship at the Gymnasium at Winterthur (1876). With this, his career as a teacher and as an author began.

Soon after returning to Switzerland, he wrote, on the invitation of the educational authorities at Zurich, two manuals for school

use—one on Universal History, the other on the History of Switzerland, models of conciseness, lucidity and knowledge. In 1887 he became Professor of History at the Zurich Polytechnikum, and, while acting in this capacity, wrote one of his best-known works, *The Origins of the Swiss Confederation* (1891), a book which at once made him famous. When his old teacher, Professor Georg von Wyss, retired, Oechsli was clearly marked out to succeed him; and accordingly, in 1893, he became Professor of Swiss History at the University of Zurich, a post which he held till the end of his life.

Like most other Continental Professors, he regarded research and the publication of results as an essential part of his professorial duties. The first notable result of his labours as professor was the issue, in 1899, of a volume on “Switzerland in the years 1798 and 1799.” This may be regarded as a sort of prologue to his *magnum opus*, the first instalment of which speedily followed. He had been invited by the publishing house of Hirzel at Leipzig to take part in the great combined work known as “*Staatengeschichte der neuesten Zeit*,” and in 1903 he published the first volume of his History of Switzerland, entitled “Switzerland under the French Protectorate, 1798–1813.” As originally contemplated by him, the work was to consist of three volumes, the second volume extending to 1847, the third to the end of the period. But the amount of material which he collected proved too great to allow him to carry out his intentions. He worked at the archives in Paris and Vienna, unearthing much new matter; and meanwhile many particular episodes were illuminated by other writers. Consequently the second volume took him ten years to finish; and, when it appeared (1913), though filling over 800 pages, it extended only to 1830. The two volumes throw a flood of light, not only on the politics, but also on the economic life of Switzerland during these thirty-two years.

Shortly after the appearance of the second volume, the Great War broke out; and Oechsli's sympathies were painfully divided between the combatants, for, though a native of German-speaking Switzerland, and of a city possessing many intimate German connections, his feeling for France, and for Latin civilisation generally, was very strong. Perhaps it was owing partly to this mental conflict, and to the pressure of world-shaking events, partly

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to the feeling of approaching age, and the consciousness of health already undermined, that he now abandoned the attempt to finish his book, and handed over his materials to a younger colleague, Professor Gagliardi, who undertook the onerous and highly responsible task of completing his work.

To suppose that Oechsli's literary activity was confined to the above-mentioned books would be far from the truth. Throughout his life, from 1876 onwards, he continued to publish smaller contributions to historical literature, as well as many reviews of books, together with occasional papers on questions of the day. His *opera minora* are too numerous to be recounted in anything but a bibliographical catalogue, but some of the most important may be mentioned, if only to shew the many-sided activity and constant energy of the writer. Perhaps the chief of these was his history of the Swiss Polytechnikum, 1855–1905, with a sketch of its previous development, a volume of 400 pages. He also wrote many lives for the German "Allgemeine Biographie." Other works of importance were treatises on the early history of the Valais and the Grisons, on "the Cantons and their Allies" (*Orte und Zugewandten*), on "Zwingli as a Statesman," and on "Geneva and the Treaty of Lausanne." The last of these contains a clear account of the Seignorial and other lands connected with Geneva, their organisation and feudalities, which throws many sidelights on mediaeval conditions elsewhere in Switzerland.

In all these works he was in the habit of going straight to the sources. He never relied on second-hand information, and always impressed on his classes at the University the necessity of thorough and original research. His lectures were popular and largely attended. In the presentation of his results he shewed considerable literary and artistic skill; he was an excellent narrator; his sketches of individual characters are terse and vivid, and his description of events is often picturesque. He was a man of deep convictions and he made no effort to conceal them; his strong personality shews throughout his works. In religion he was a stout Protestant, but his sense of justice (as this little book will shew) made him fair to those with whom he disagreed. Warm-hearted and unselfish and scrupulously avoiding self-advertisement, he had scientific opponents, but no personal enemies. He loved travel; and, ardent patriot as he was, nothing gave him greater pleasure than excursions

in the mountainous regions of his beloved and beautiful country. Those who knew him estimated the man even higher than the *Gelehrte*. His death at Weggis on April 26, 1919, removed a figure undoubtedly the first among Swiss writers of his time, and one which was in the leading rank of historians on the wider stage of the world.

The book which I now introduce to the reader was almost Professor Oechsli's last work. It was in 1911 that I invited him to undertake it. The book was completed in the autumn of 1914; and the text, revised by him, was translated by the summer of 1916. The war unfortunately forbade immediate publication; and the arrears in which the University Press found itself involved after the Armistice, combined with other unavoidable engagements, compelled a further postponement. Fortunately the translators had the advantage, during their work, of frequent communication with the author, concerning the correct English equivalents of Swiss political terms, and the interpretation of other difficulties; and their text was subsequently submitted to a careful and thorough revision by a scholar well-versed in Swiss History, for whose services I cannot be sufficiently grateful, but whose name I am not at liberty to mention. Thus the obvious misfortune, that the English text lost the benefit of the author's revision, has been, so far as was possible, remedied.

The spelling of place-names is bound to be a difficulty in any book dealing with tri-lingual Switzerland, a difficulty which I cannot hope to have surmounted to everyone's satisfaction. The rule which I have adopted is to adhere in general to Professor Oechsli's spelling, which is naturally German, but in the French-speaking Cantons to adopt the form in current use there. In the case, however, of names like Lucerne, Geneva, and Constance, which are so fixed in common parlance that it would seem pedantic to alter them, I have kept to the English use.

G. W. PROTHERO

March, 1922

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