

In Geneva – the City

At first blush Geneva does not spring to mind as a prime holiday destination. But if your mind is on literature there is Voltaire in one direction along the lake, Byron and the Shelleys in another, Rousseau in the city itself and also at its centre a publishing venture, *la Bibliothèque britannique*, born of revolutionary turmoil. By a happy accident that magazine brought Jane Austen to the Continent.

If you are in Geneva, climb the hill to the Vieille Ville, Place Bourg de Four, where there are several restaurants, a very helpful bookshop and a good *pâtisserie*. Restored, take the Rue de l'Hôtel de Ville, to the north-west. You will pass the opening to the neo-classical Cathedral of St Pierre on the right; ahead at the wider T-junction, the Hôtel de Ville is on your left and several ancient cannon on the right. Turn *left* down the short Rue R.H. Fazy. It ends in a classical portico framing, against a leafy background, the statue of the patriot, diplomat and literary editor of the *Bibliothèque britannique*, Charles Pictet de Rochemont. There is another pleasant café just the far side of the portico on the left, particularly agreeable at lunch time on a sunny, spring day. But if sustenance is not a priority, turn *right* into the Rue de Granges, *la belle adresse* of Geneva, fine eighteenth century town houses, sober in their grey stone. Stop to glance at number 14, home of F.G. Maurice, the business partner of the *Bibliothèque britannique* and where it was printed. Continue as the street curves to the right, slides down the hill and is renamed Grand Mazel, past its fountain, ending in another T-junction. The present number 19 was the site of the popular reading room owned by J.J. Paschoud, who in 1822 printed a translation of *Pride and Prejudice* without cuts. Turn *right* up the Grand' Rue with its attractive shops especially the Maison des Amateurs du Livre and you will return to the cannon. Altogether a 20 minute stroll unless window shopping detains you.



THE CITY

What was it about Geneva that made the city conducive to Jane Austen's ethos and view of human behaviour? Let us, like Elizabeth Bennet, make it 'our business to be satisfied' with *un peu d'histoire*, as the green Michelin guides used to say, on the way to better understanding for ourselves as in the event it was for her.

In the latter half of the 18th century Geneva was a magnet, rather like Hong Kong in the thirty years before the 2001 handover to China. It consisted of the city proper with some surrounding territory and more in separate holdings along both sides of the lake, similar to the Hong Kong archipelago. The city state was a republic, unusually well run by a small ruling class and taxes were low. It was extremely prosperous through high-skilled trades in clock and watch-making, jewellery and printed cottons; it had extensive commercial connections with England, France and the various parts of as yet disunited Germany and Italy; its banks, owned and managed by a small group of inter-related families, also had flourishing branches outside the city's territories – the Banque Schmidmeyer, for instance, had a branch in London, the Banque Mallet in Paris. The zenith of Geneva's prosperity was around 1760 to 1785.

For all the strength of its far-flung commercial interests Geneva, as a political entity, formed part of the very loose Swiss confederation. Its separate component parts viewed each other with some suspicion. The glue that held them however elastically, was, apart from geography, the Protestant religion; here Geneva, the cradle of Calvinism, the extreme form of continental Protestantism, was thought to lead.

In the context of literature this had contradictory effects; for instance there was no theatre in the city until 1783 – the year that 20,000 lived off watch and clockmaking – allegedly, gossip said, because the male city councillors did not want their womenfolk corrupted by drama. On the other hand the ideas of the Enlighten-

ment, with its secular emphasis, were given a very fair hearing.

The heroes of the Enlightenment, the promoters of the *Encyclopédie* (the first attempt at a summary of all Western knowledge) were sheltered here. Voltaire, for one, spent many years in and around Geneva, staying for part of the time in a beautiful house, Les Délices, (open to the public in summer and well worth a visit). What with the heavy hand of censorship in France, many French authors and publishers often found it more prudent to publish through a friendly house in Geneva and have the copies carried more or less secretly across the frontier. Such was the case with the *Encyclopédie*.

Overall, in an intellectually liberal climate, there was no great enthusiasm for literature. However, in neighbouring Lausanne literature flourished, especially among women. It was at least a hobby promoting the social acceptability of its practitioners. But Geneva preferred the sciences, two nascent ones in particular – meteorology and the study of high mountains. (Remember, Humboldt, the Prussian-born explorer and natural scientist, had not yet travelled to central and South America, let alone published his definitive findings on climate, oceanography and geology.)

Some miles north, on the edge of another lake, Neufchatel, then a Prussian dependency, harboured the ‘Neufchatel set’ of young Englishmen on their Grand Tour, including Jane Austen’s brother Edward. They came to observe a country brought to popular attention in England with Abraham Stanyan’s *An Account of Switzerland*, written in 1714, to admire the fine buildings and cleanliness of Rousseau’s birthplace (marked by a plaque at 40 Grand’ Rue) and Voltaire’s sanctuary, to check out the prosperity of its industry and commerce, and the high level of literacy of the population, to converse with the cultivated and, if the historian Edward Gibbon’s experiences in Lausanne² are anything to go by, to dance, flirt, gamble and get drunk.

Significantly, in the second half of the 18th century 90% of the population of the city of Geneva (40% of the city-state, including all

its villages) was literate. This had been achieved through the efforts of the local church – its *Société des Catéchumènes* [Society of Confirmation Candidates], started in 1736 – it provided sound primary education for both sexes with the aim of allowing pupils to benefit from religious instruction, in the first instance to make Bible reading easy. These classes were open also to the children of the *domiciliés*, resident foreigners, most of them attracted by the opportunities for work and education. Inspectors reported on the ten classes, five for boys and five for girls, with 65 to 80 pupils apiece. Very few were unable to read, the illiterate being mostly the children of the incomers, who, as such, had no political rights.

In this they were not alone and the differences in political status were the focus for periodic rowdy dissatisfaction in an otherwise most attractive city state. The population was divided between two major groups – the first, the oligarchs, were *bourgeois de Genève* (burghers) and *citoyens* (citizens); they, that is the males, had political rights of voting and sitting on governing councils, worked in a professional capacity in well-paid jobs and controlled the levers of power, both economic and political.

The second, much more numerous group of *habitants* (inhabitants) and *natifs* (natives, ie, born within the city territories) were also considered nationals – with the *domiciliés*, they lived in the suburbs, worked in less skilled trades for low pay and had no political rights. For them moderate taxes and good government were not enough. Periodic riots led to minor concessions – political rights were marginally widened after each but the newly enfranchised did not have sufficient leverage to bring about more far-reaching reforms.