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A Swiss Visitor in Berkshire

Karl Viktor von Bonstetten (1745-1832)¹ was born a member of one of the leading families of Berne, the Swiss republic which in the 18th century was a regional power of great wealth. During his studies in Yverdon and Geneva he got to know Rousseau and Voltaire, the leading figures of the Enlightenment, and greatly influenced by them, rebelled against his patrician upbringing. His father agreed to send him for further studies to Holland, from where he came to England in the summer of the year 1769.

Ever since the Swiss officer Beat Ludwig von Muralt had published in 1725 his *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français* in which he compared the English favourably to the French, there had been a steady flow of Swiss travellers to England.² Liberal-minded aristocrats who realised that the patrician *ancien régime* in the Swiss republics was doomed, looked to England for a political system which combined a sort of parliamentary democracy with an enlightened monarchy.

Von Bonstetten was similarly attracted by the English political system which he had studied through the works of Montesquieu. He spoke little English, however, so after a few weeks in London he travelled to Berkshire to learn the language. In the middle of August he writes to his parents that he is now staying with a "Mr Poinz" who had invited him to his home near Newbury, having made his acquaintance two years before in a Swiss town and having recognised him during a ball in London.

I have been able to identify this "Mr Poinz" as William Poyntz (1734-1809), son of the well-known diplomat and politician Stephen Poyntz (1685-1750).³ William Poyntz went to Oxford where he graduated in the year 1760. Afterwards he took over the manor of Midgham near Newbury which his father had acquired

in 1735, Von Bonstetten writes about his host: "His wife is very agreeable and speaks several languages, his house is very well kept; he has forty horses, twenty servants, ninety hunting dogs, and three children".⁴ The wife of William Poyntz was Isabella Courtenay, the three children mentioned were the three eldest daughters, Georgina Ann (1763-1851), Charlotte Louisa (1766-1840) and Isabella Henrietta (1767-1843).⁵ In a family history we can find some traces of him: "William Poyntz made no great figure in the country, as his father had done, but appears to have lived quietly on his estate."⁶ Another source gives a slightly more unorthodox picture of him: "He had a large property and good ancestry, but was a very eccentric master, whose pleasure it was to do nothing as other people did."⁷

In his letters to his father, von Bonstetten paints some nice impressions of life in Berkshire: "The life of the English noblemen is generally quite respectable, and there is a greatness in their manners as in their souls. ... One lives quite casually in the countryside. Breakfast is at 10 o'clock, afterwards one walks, *la toilette* is just before lunch which lasts 4 hours, then coffee will be served followed by tea, and dinner is at 11 or 12 o'clock."⁸ He describes the family: "The three children, aged two, four and six, are the prettiest girls in the world, the two younger ones are always without shoes and socks, running through dew and rain as is normal in England; the oldest one of 6 years wears out of decency shoes and socks. ... The children are polite and full of respect, but still they are the friends of their parents. What a lesson for us! They are obliged always to make their obeisances to father and mother when entering a room; in the evening, the father of the house speaks a prayer with all the servants and the children, afterwards the children come one by one to make their obeisances, firstly to their father, giving him a kiss and a goodnight, then bending their knees and their heads asking for his blessing, then they go to their mother. But all this quite casual and with all the gaiety in the world. How the necessities of nature are set to fulfil when they are respectable! My soul has been moved to tears, and I have asked myself, where are the fathers virtuous enough to receive without embarrassment such homages which remind them of their duties?"⁹ As relations between von Bonstetten and his father were somewhat strained, his reflection on "respectable necessities of nature" is quite clearly a critique of the patrician lifestyle in Berne.

We have already noted that Poyntz was in possession of some 90 hunting dogs. Von Bonstetten follows the fox hunt with keen interest, sometimes baffled: "Mr

Poinz has quite a big house for his dogs; they have their own kitchen, eating every day a soup consisting of a quarter of a horse and lots of flour mixed with water. The raising of the dogs costs some 100 guineas a year. Mr Poinz spends all his mornings hunting; he never carries a gun. He calls our way of hunting a chicken-hearted murder; much nobler he finds hounding the game or letting it be tormented by the dogs.¹⁰ Indeed, William Poyntz was a famous, sometimes infamous hunter.¹¹ In later years, he went hunting with the Prince of Wales, the future George IV. In 1768, just before the visit of von Bonstetten, he had been found guilty by magistrates of breaching the fences to the common land near Bucklebury.¹² Later, he served as a local justice.¹³ There exists a picture by Gainsborough which shows him in hunting clothes with gun and dog,¹⁴ and in Midgham there is still a plaque in his memory.

Although enjoying life in the countryside, von Bonstetten already foresees the problems of this lifestyle: "The national debt will result in a revolution of manners; the taxes on land have the effect that it is better to place one's money in a bank than to invest it in land, which disturbs the fabric of society."¹⁵

Von Bonstetten stayed for about two weeks in Midgham; on the 2 September he wrote to his father from a new address in South Moreton, some fifteen miles north of Newbury where he was with a "Reverend Smithies". This was the Reverend Humphrey Smythies, born 1724 in Colchester, who studied in Cambridge from 1740 to 1744, was ordained as a deacon in the year 1746 and as a priest in 1750. In 1759 he became vicar of Blewbury, where he stayed till 1781.¹⁶ Evidently he lived at *South Moreton*, some miles to the west of Blewbury, where on the 15 February 1765 his first son, Henry Yeats Smythies, was born.¹⁷ Von Bonstetten writes to his father about life in the rural community; his host took him also on a visit to Oxford. Always keen to stress the advantages of republicanism compared to a system based on aristocracy, von Bonstetten remarks somewhat overzealously: "The seventeen colleges are not monuments of the pride of kings but to the patriotism of citizens."¹⁸ For the weekend of the 7th September, von Bonstetten planned to visit the commemoration of Shakespeare's birthday by David Garrick in Stratford-upon-Avon, but a Swiss colleague he invited declined and he couldn't afford the trip on his own. Later, he was invited by William Blackstone, member of Parliament who lived in a big manor in Wallingford. Sometimes he is puzzled by English customs and traditions: "The English have, underneath a cold and arrogant expression, warmth of sentiment and vivacity of spirits. ... In Oxford I met an old gentleman at the sculpture gallery; I greeted him but he didn't react. I

A Swiss Visitor in Berkshire

saw him again in the street and greeted him with a kind of recognition; he looked hard at me and passed without greeting. Some hours later he spoke to me, without lifting his hat, saying in great urgency, that he was drawn to me and that I had to visit him."¹⁹

Having a French-speaking servant and speaking French himself, von Bonstetten was intrigued to learn of the rather mixed esteem in which the French were held. "In general I'm surprised to see in this country the adoration of French fashion and manners. Nothing is valued unless it originates from France. Only the peasants still keep the old images one had of these enemies of England. My host has told me how his parishioners were quite surprised to see the tall figure and friendly features of Jean, my servant. They still thought the French were small and meagre as pictured by Hogarth. But as a compensation the women were quite frank that they were bored by their men and that there was nothing more refreshing than a handsome French face."²⁰

Sometimes, everyday life had its surprises. One of his letters was "Returned to M. Bonstetten at South Moreton near Wallingford Berks to pay Inland Postage 3d having only Paid the Foreign Postage."²¹ He met some other Swiss citizens living in Berkshire, one being Etienne Naville, a banker with a house in London as well. Then again, he visited Henry Temple, second Viscount Palmerston, in his magnificent house near Windsor of which he wrote to his mother: "You can imagine the wealth of some of these noblemen when I'm telling you that some of them have 200 horses and 100 servants."²²

He became interested in a young, beautiful, rich widow. His host, the Reverend Smythies, had pointed her out to him when she was standing at the window of her house; he discussed quite seriously with his father a possible marriage as the woman, aged about twenty years, was heir to £30,000 to £40,000. In his letters he mentions her only by her initials J.L. But when he tried to get to know her he learned that "a visit to a young lady is considered as a very serious business"²³, and so he didn't want to push his luck.

From South Moreton he went to Newbury where he stayed with another "young, extremely rich widow". One evening, the Mayor of the town gave a dinner for some 300 guests. Von Bonstetten describes it in a somewhat amused tone. "Everybody had already taken his place when I entered with my tall and quite masculine widow who was covered from head to toe in silver and diamonds. ... We

sat nearly half an hour in front of a beautiful dessert just looking at it and nearly dying from hunger but nobody ate. ... Finally the music started the soup was served, everybody found his voice again and started eating. You will be surprised to learn, my dear mother, that we had to drink out of a huge bowl which I had to lift with both arms and out of which I had seen some fifty people drinking before me; that we ate without any napkin, with long forks having only two prongs with which you could pierce the big lumps of meat, and that we had to use the knife instead of fork and spoon. I cut my lips several times before I managed to eat properly. Now I take the fork into my left hand to load the knife, and I use knife and fork with so much ease that I can nearly empty a bowl of soup with them.²⁴ Other manners seemed to be more protective: "I was honoured to be partner of my tall widow for all the dances of the night, because it is in this country out of the question to dance with more than one woman at the same ball."²⁵ In the light of English manners of the time it seems possible that von Bonstetten, contrary to his belief, got something wrong and committed, indeed, a faux-pas by dancing too often with his landlady.

In October 1769, he went to Bath where he met by chance Norton Nicholls, parson and man of letters, who in turn introduced him to the famous poet Thomas Gray, author of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Young von Bonstetten would become, during two precious months in Cambridge, the last love of the ageing poet; but that is another story.²⁶

After his return to Switzerland, von Bonstetten became a well-known writer, politician and philosopher; as a political philosopher he was greatly influenced by the English political system and Scottish philosophers like Dugald Stewart. But his favourable impression of England arose in Berkshire. In his old age he still remembered those days fondly: "In my whole life I have never experienced so much love as in England. That was because I loved the English nation and liberty with all the warmth of my heart, and I think my nice features may have helped as well."²⁷

References

- 1 The author of this article is writing a biography of von Bonstetten which will be published in spring 1997. Any further information relating to von Bonstetten's stay in Berkshire, or indeed England, would be greatly appreciated.
- 2 Hans Utz: *Liberty and Property. England im 18. Jahrhundert nach Berichten von Bernern*. Berne 1992.
- 3 For information on Stephen Poyntz see *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 4 All letters by Bonstetten from England are written in French and translated by the author. They will be published this year in the first volume of a historical-critical edition of letters by Bonstetten: *Bonstettiana I*, ed. by Doris and Peter Walser-Wilhelm, Berne 1996. For the quotation see letter to father, dated second half of August 1769.
- 5 John Maclean: *An Historical and Genealogical Memoir of the Family of Poyntz*. Privately printed, London 1886, p.219.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.219.
- 7 *Victoria County History of Berkshire*, Vol. ii, London 1930, p.288.
- 8 Letter to his father, dated second half of August 1769.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Victoria County History of Berkshire*, Vol. ii, p.288. William Poyntz is here erroneously identified with his father Stephen Poyntz.
- 12 Arthur L. Humphreys *Bucklebury: A Berkshire Parish, the Home of Bolinbroke 1701-1715*. Reading 1932, p.523.
- 13 Samuel Barfield: *Thatcham, Berks and its Manors*. Oxford 1901, pp.67 and 69.
- 14 MacLean, p.219.
- 15 Letter to his father, dated second half of August 1769.
- 16 J. Venn: *Alumni Cantabrigiensiæ, 1616-1751*.
- 17 J. Venn: *Alumni Cantabrigiensiæ, 1752-1900*.
- 18 Letter to his father, dated 2/9/1769.
- 19 Letter to his father, dated 2/9/1769.
- 20 Letter to his father, dated 16/9/1769.
- 21 Inscription on the letter to his father, dated 16/9/1769.
- 22 Letter to his mother, dated 27/9/1769.
- 23 Letter to his father, dated 9/11/1769.
- 24 Letter to his mother, dated 27/9/1769.
- 25) *Ibid.*
- 26) R.W. Ketton-Cremer: *Thomas Gray. A Biography*. Cambridge 1955, p.245-267; A.L. Lytton Sells: *Thomas Gray. His Life and Works*. London 1980, p.131-141; and three letters from Gray to von Bonstetten, in Paget Toynbee/Leonard Whibley (ed): *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, volume 3, Oxford 1935.
- 27) Letter to Heinrich Zschokke, dated 30/12/1827.