

Sophie von La Roche, Travels through Switzerland, France, and England (1784–85)

Abstract

Sophie von La Roche (1730–1807) was not only an author and magazine editor but also an avid traveler who was known for her work throughout Europe. She was unique in pursuing educational travel as an independent woman. During these journeys she kept travel journals, which she published to earn a living. In accounts of her travels in Switzerland, the Netherlands, France, England, and within Germany, La Roche offered a panoramic view of the various countries and their respective inhabitants. She described the landscapes, history, politics, and peoples of a country for her audience of female readers. She also introduced the national characteristics and character of these countries according to concepts that were current at the time. The typical characteristics and virtues of the various countries are presented in comparison to German characteristics or those of other nations, whereby class attributes appear to play a role.

Source

I. Tagebuch einer Reise durch die Schweiz [Diary of a Journey through Switzerland]

[...]

Lauterburg, the 26th of June

[...]

Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace, was still a German Imperial city a hundred years ago, when in 1647 beautiful Alsace still belonged to the Imperial Austrian house, but both were absorbed into the French Crown territories as a result of Louis XIV's spirit of conquest. Our Rhine flows through this beautiful land, which is so abundant in field crops and tree fruits, forests and meadows; it is bounded on one side by the Vosges mountain range in which excellent silver, copper, and lead mines are located. The traveler passing through will not be surprised that in France a thanksgiving celebration was held at the time of the conquest, and in Vienna the loss was deplored. The regions around the city have been very much beautified as the result of the French nation's spirit to embellish. Upon approaching, your brother peered at the fortifications and soldiers; but I looked around at the trade bustle and the very well-dressed women. The Gasthof zum Geist is no longer the old, many-angled building that caused me such anxiety and difficult staircase-climbing eighteen years ago, but a spacious establishment with nice rooms.

[...]

I find it marvelous to see the industry which in a rough, unproductive region like this one produces everything for the people and replaces everything that they lack. But it is also very necessary, if travel is to be useful, to know something of the history, the government, and the national character of the land through which the journey leads and also to know enough natural history that the traveler notices the forest and orchard trees, field crops, and other plants with which heaven has adorned the earth here and there and provided its inhabitants. [That way, the traveler] will not let his eyes roam around thoughtlessly with an empty head, but will observe lands and people in their variety, compare the shortcomings and advantages of this province and that with one another and form an opinion about them, be more aware of his own good fortune, or be able to appreciate more fully the prosperity of

others. I have already talked about the deliberation and diligence of the Black Forest residents, how they use their soil, their forests, their water, gold, and metals. Their love of the fatherland is shown by the fact that with the money they earn they return again and again to their home. [...]

Lausanne, the 17th of July

Now we are at our destination. The way here from Berne was superbly accomplished with incomprehensible difficulty across chasms. The French villages look sad, and their stone houses are not as bucolic and tidy by far as the wooden houses of the German peasants. The people also do not have the healthy, fleshy appearance, and all their features are sharper, defined by strenuous labor; they arouse pity and a kind of disgust, because they not only look miserable but also messy and unclean on their person and in their households. Towards 7 o'clock, we sighted the peaks of the icy Savoyard mountains, illuminated in reddish fire, and then Lake Geneva, which in the absence of wind reflected, smooth as a mirror, the last rays of our common sun, shining like silver, and revealed the great shadowy impressions of the other mountains. On both shores, still illuminated spires of towers and castles looked out from a sea of green. An unnamable feeling of joy and admiration filled my soul upon coming closer and closer to these mountains and the regions that I had wished [to see] for so many years and whose history I had read. The people and nature were known in my mind, and now I saw both before me. [...] These mountains and the magnificent lake were to me the majestic sons of creation, which I beheld with just as much awe as joy. It was an invigorating sight for my heart, for as long as I have clearly thought and felt, great mountain ranges have exercised a very strong effect on me. They do not humble me, these mighty creations; to the contrary, I find myself elevated, when at the sight of them I think of our common Creator, who gave me, fragile creature that I am, an immortal soul, a gift that surely surpasses everything which His divine hand could bestow. I do not wish, like these mountains, to be only an object of admiration; it is more to my liking to have a spirit that knows how to appreciate and love all the other good things in this life. [...]

Geneva, the 21st of July

[...]

The citizen of Geneva is attributed with having an advantageously mixed character: that is, from the neighboring Swiss he has a sound mind without the Swiss neighbor's coldness; his good heart without the associated imprudence; his courage without his audacity. And from the Geneva citizen's second neighbor, the French side, he has the wit and liveliness of mind without the frivolousness; he is chivalrous and genteel like the French side, but not as vain and extravagant, and is the most intensely dedicated friend but more constant. The citizens from Geneva have transformed the suspicious cunning of the Savoy citizen into political sagacity in speech and action, and penuriousness into sensible household management. All of that together is the reason why foreigners of all nations like to stay in Geneva; this multi-dimensional mentality has given Geneva great scholars in all the sciences as well as great artists. [...]

II. *Journal einer Reise durch Frankreich [Journal of a Journey through France]*

[England]

I do not know the extent to which the common people in England or Holland take an active interest in the cleanliness for which those two nations are admired. But it is certain that this virtue does not prevail here, that common women, children, and men are disgustingly dirty, and that many thousands of people live in the most wretched corners before which the eyes withdraw shuddering. In all my travels I have seen nothing sadder and

more uncleanly than I saw here in many hundreds of houses during these few days. Our young, rich travelers are blinded by the gleam that very naturally shines in the capital of a great kingdom where among eight hundred thousand people there are so many who are great and rich, to whom external appearance seems to be everything, and everything is used for that. My spirit is not at all indifferent to the tasteful beauty that prevails in buildings, clothing, and furnishings. To the contrary, I bless the rich, who give so many artists and workers bread. But the sight of very great misery so close nearby at the same time touches my heart, and I cannot put that to rest, despite the fact that it was often said: Oh, here they must not pay attention to that, for otherwise they will be made just as unhappy by the sensibility of their hearts as those people are!

[...]

[France]

[...] Among the fortunate are few who know anything about our Germany; only Hamburg, which annually has more than 30 million livres in trade with France, and Bremen, Lübeck, and also Frankfurt on the Main, whose trade with France is said to amount to 22 million, are known in this region. They know everything about England, Holland, Spain, and the other parts of the world that one needs to know for trade. In general, a certain amount of willfulness and disdain for all other nations is mixed into their talk, and the great simplicity with which our Emperor traveled was met with little acclaim. However, among the men of letters traces of the spirit of [Michel de] Montaigne and [Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de] Montesquieu, and a thousand beautiful ideas of old and new authors are connected to their fiery national spirit, and make their conversations very pleasant. How often it can be observed that the benevolent spirit of the world gives all its creatures support in the form of joy about advantages. It has been a year since I saw the noble joy of the Swiss about their freedom, laws, ice-covered mountains, waterfalls, and secluded, fruitful Alps. Here the river connected to the ocean and the ships which sail to all parts of the world and return from there are a source of happy pride. May heaven always give them a noble soul for that purpose! [...]

The 23rd, afternoon, in the Hotel de la Chine.

My travel companion is in the countryside alone, and I am happy to be in my agreeable quarters and nearer to Germany. But my view is much changed: in Bordeaux, many hundreds of ships passed before my window; here there are as many coaches; the former quiet, the latter, noisy. Instead of the splendid green hills on the opposite bank of the magnificent Garonne, high walls present themselves opposite me. The sailors lay under green leaves, the masons lie under the arch of a coach gate; casks lay there, stones lie here before my windows. I am also somewhat benumbed here by the rattling, often look around me as in Bordeaux, and my feelings overall are not as they were there. My greatest pleasure in returning here was finding news that my children and their father are well and await my return with amity. However, it was also pleasant for me to hear that the reentry of the Queen, usual at the end of every confinement, is not until tomorrow and that the Bachmann family is again offering me a place on their balcony. This comforting feeling on the part of a foreigner from having met good and loving people renewed my intention to show respect and offer services, as much as possible, to all foreigners; for there must be an easy exchange of accommodation and virtues among people, just as they barter plants and art works with each other. In this way, soul and mind gain just as much grace in thought and conduct as gold flows into the cashboxes of merchants from calculating additional clothing and food requirements. How many ideas I could convey to my beloved fatherland, if I, like Yorick, had a gift for extracting several pieces from the moving street scene rushing by, capturing them with good comments, and displaying them where you are. The industriousness and skill of the quarrymen and masons working on the building opposite delight me. The royal library is adjacent to my residence,

and the residence of the keeper of the great seal, Mr. [Armand Thomas Hue de] Miromenis], is located to my right. Downstairs in the building are a coffee house owner, an innkeeper, a saddler on the other side, and above a musician. How Yorick would have used all of this! How he would have described the no longer very young man who drove by a quarter of an hour ago with a little dog on his lap that had red and white ribbons around its brown neck! However, he would have been just as little able to describe or count the various forms of coaches and conveyances as I am. [...]

Source: I. Sophie von La Roche, *Tagebuch einer Reise durch die Schweiz*. Altenburg: Richter, 1787, pp. 15–16, 51–52, 185–88, 225–26. Available online at: <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11248807-1>; II. Sophie von La Roche, *Journal einer Reise durch Frankreich*. Altenburg: Richter, 1787, pp. 79–80, 346–47, 366–67. Available online at: https://books.google.com/books?id=f_5cAAAAcAAJ&pg=PP5#v=onepage&q&f=false

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Sophie von La Roche, Travels through Switzerland, France, and England (1784–85), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-300>> [July 02, 2025].