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William Denison McCracken (1864-1923): A Progressive's View of Swiss History and Politics

Although it is impossible to evaluate the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of American nineteenth-century views of Switzerland, one can observe a remarkable increase in American interest for Swiss history and politics in the early 1890s.¹ In those years several books and various articles appeared in American magazines that explored different aspects of the history and the political system of the "Alpine Sister Republic." While previous American publications on Switzerland consisted mainly of travel reports, magazine and newspaper articles, John Martin Vincent's "A Study in Swiss History" of 1888 started a series of works that analyzed Switzerland's past in a systematic and scholarly way.²

The increasing attractiveness of Switzerland to tourists in the second half of the nineteenth century made Americans more aware of the country's extraordinary past and of its political system which exhibited striking constitutional parallels to that of the United States.

In the last three decades of the nineteenth century American historiography changed fundamentally. A new generation of historians rejected the writings by "gentleman scholars" such as Motley and Prescott and critiqued their "romantic approach." Influenced and partly educated by European and especially German professors, these scholars adopted their methods and introduced the institution of historical seminars, thereby professionalizing the study of American history.³ Most of these "scientific historians" adhered to the evolutionist theory of Spencer and interpreted the origin and development of American political institutions accordingly. Comparative constitutional history became a predominant device to evaluate the history of American institutions and contrasted them with the development of European political systems. This approach led several scholars also to examine the constitutional history of Switzerland and to place it into an international context.⁴ Thus many politically interested Americans became acquainted with the evolution of Switzerland's political system and the majority of them perceived it in highly positive terms.

To this group of American historians and political scientists belonged William Denison McCrackan who became known for his numerous publications on various aspects of Swiss history and politics.⁵ He was born in Munich on 12 February 1864, a son of American parents. After having received his early education in France, Germany and Vevey, Switzerland (1867-72), he came to the United States at the age of fourteen, entered St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire (1878-82), then Trinity College at Hartford, Connecticut; in 1883 he received the B.A., in 1885 the M.A. degree from that institution.

After his graduation he traveled extensively, visiting Greece and parts of Asia, then went to Switzerland where he studied its history and government. Starting in 1890 he published various articles on his Swiss travels and on his investigations of Swiss institutions in journals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Arena*, the *Cosmopolitan*, the *North American Review* and *Harper's Magazine*. In 1892 he wrote his first book titled *The Rise of the Swiss Republic* which served for many years as a textbook in American schools and colleges. In 1894 followed *Romance and Teutonic Switzerland*, a traveler's guidebook, and one year later the pamphlet *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*.⁶

McCrackan's works deserve to be scrutinized. This essay explores three major aspects in his view of Switzerland, his interpretation of Swiss history, his analysis of the Swiss political system, and his appeals to introduce Swiss models of direct democracy in the United States. A conclusion will briefly discuss the reception of his work by contemporaries and evaluate his efforts from a historical perspective.

I

After graduation in 1885, the family's wealth allowed McCrackan to return to Switzerland for extended stays. He dropped his original plan to translate a Swiss history written in German or French and pursued, instead, the traces of early Swiss history in the old cantons and did extensive research in libraries and archives. Having completed his investigations for *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, McCrackan claimed that he "had a more general knowledge of Swiss life and of Switzerland itself below the snow line than any English-speaking person."⁷

This work is divided into five parts. The first deals with the time before the founding of the Confederation, the second describes the period up to the Federation of Eight States and is followed by an analysis of "The Confederation at the Height of Its Military Power." The last two parts cover the Reformation period and the emergence of the "Modern Confederation" that began in the late eighteenth and continued throughout the nineteenth century.

Although by 1892 some serious scholarly works on Swiss history were available in English, McCrackan maintained that the American knowledge of Switzerland's past was very poor. He claimed that:

It is the misfortune of Swiss history that, although very little is popularly known about it, that little is almost invariably incorrect. There is a

widespread but vague idea that a regularly organized republic had existed in the Alps from time immemorial under the name Helvetia. Nothing could be more misleading; for, as a matter of fact, the Swiss Republic had no existence before 1291.⁸

This misconception, McCrackan thought, was largely due to the William Tell myth which in the nineteenth century was very popular in both America and Europe. He doubted that Tell's endangering the life of his child and the killing of Gessler were heroic achievements, and observed that: "As long as the birth of the little mountain confederation was attributed to the chance of an arrow in its flight the true causes were overshadowed."⁹

The rejection of historically doubtful myths and the attempt critically to explain the unfolding of Switzerland's history make McCrackan an ardent disciple of the school of "Scientific Historians." In his view the main reason for the founding of Switzerland was the protection of the collectively owned land against Austrian claims: "One can not conceive of the struggle for Swiss independence without this incentive," he observed, "and it seems entirely likely that had this system of communism in land not existed at that period the Republic of Switzerland would not have sprung up in the center of Europe."¹⁰

McCrackan attributed this "rude land communism" which granted every man a joint right to woods and pastures to the influx of the first Alamanic settlers; these had enjoyed equal status in the Association of the Mark which was in charge of the communally held land. Yet the class distinctions of the feudal age existed also in the old Swiss cantons, McCrackan observed; primitive Switzerland could therefore not be called a democratic nation in the modern sense. Yet McCrackan still hailed the early expansionist period in Swiss history that led to the establishment of the Eight-Canton League:

It is perhaps a mistake to imagine primitive Switzerland as a country in which pure democratic principles, as we understand the term in this century, held unlimited sway. Equal rights for all is a modern conception and phrase. It was not understood at the time when the Confederation was founded. But with all these political shortcomings and prejudices, the early Swiss were, nevertheless, the best democrats of their day, unconscious, but practical exponents of the virtues of self-government. This was especially the case in the sequestered mountain districts, where simple habits of freedom sprang naturally from the rocky soil.¹¹

McCrackan viewed the practice of self-government and common land use as key factors in the emergence of the "First Perpetual League" in 1291 and the establishment of the Confederation of Eight States in the fourteenth century. Its structure was unique, consisting of

a group of sovereign communities, each enjoying the utmost liberty of action imaginable, bound together by no central authority, either executive, legislative, or judiciary, and yet united by perpetual leagues which proved sufficiently strong to secure immunity from without and peace

within . . . at once elastic and stable, capable of great expansion, without overstraining the bonds by which it was held together.¹²

After the battle of Näfels in 1388, the Swiss Confederation continued to expand and reached the height of its military power. McCrackan judged the ensuing wars as expansionist and fought not in self-defense, but to gain booty; thus they undermined the country's democratic traditions. Although the Covenant of Stans, concluded in 1481, preserved the Confederation's unity, the agreement's stipulations "were ominous, and prophetic of a certain decay of democracy":

The repression of popular excesses was undoubtedly within the province of the constitutional rights of the Confederates, but to forbid all popular meetings of any sort, all expressions of the public will, whatever their purport, was to deal a crushing blow to the democratic principles and practices which had so far been the chief glory of Switzerland. In fact, an aristocratic wave was passing over the land, due partly to the preponderance of the cities which were governed by powerful magistrates instead of open-air assemblies like the country districts, and partly to the influence of foreign Courts.¹³

McCrackan perceived in the period of the Reformation which brought new and bitter internal confrontations a further weakening of inner unity, although he appreciated the religious significance of Zwingli and especially of Calvin for international Protestantism; "the work of Zwingli and Calvin," he claimed, "made the most profound and lasting impression of Switzerland upon human development, and fully vindicated her right to rank with the nations which have shaped the destinies of man."¹⁴

McCrackan severely criticized the subjection and exploitative administration of French and Italian regions by the German cantons; he considered those events as one of the darkest chapters in Swiss history as the Confederates usurped the very feudal rights against which they had fought so hard in their own struggle for independence.¹⁵ McCrackan also criticized Swiss mercenary policy for its lack of ethical concerns. He maintained that fighting for pay and for whatever, even ignoble, cause debased Swiss mentality: "The only excuse for the mercenary system, which was ever allowable, was the one reported to have been made by a Swiss to a Frenchman: 'We fight for honor; you for money,' said the Frenchman. 'Yes,' replied the Swiss, 'we both fight for what we have not got.'"¹⁶

Thus McCrackan saw the originally truly democratic spirit of Switzerland undermined from the end of the Middle Ages until the end of the eighteenth century by the rise of the mercenary system, the religious conflicts resulting from the Reformation, the preponderance of the aristocratically governed cities, and the exploitation of subject lands.

McCrackan interpreted the "Restoration" period in Swiss history (1815-30) which followed the French invasion of 1798 and the establishment of the Helvetic Republic as the last but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to restore the ancien régime. In his view, this period "was

marked by a strange disregard of all the great political principles which the French revolution had brought into the world"; but at the same time it proved "valuable to Switzerland as the breathing spell, as a time of repose and recuperation."¹⁷

In contrast, McCrackan viewed the period from 1830 to 1891 as one of striking political achievements that not only led to the foundation of a genuinely democratic confederation in 1848, but culminated in the introduction of the initiative and referendum on a federal level. Summing up his evaluation of six hundred years of Swiss history, McCrackan stated:

The old Confederation seems like the caterpillar, destined in dying to give place to something better; the Helvetic Republic like the chrysalis, acting as a means of transformation; and the present Confederation like the butterfly which finally emerges, the fair product of the decay which has preceded it. Such is the brief record of Switzerland's experiments in self-government. The six centuries during which she has grappled with this problem display a veritable catalogue of priceless precedents for the benefit of all nations engaged in the same task. Unostentatious, and seemingly so insignificant amongst the great powers of the world, she has in the past had a noble mission, and in the future will have a still nobler one.¹⁸

The gradual constitutional development from the commune to the cantons and eventually to the confederation of his day justified, in McCrackan's opinion, "the faith of the early patriots from 1291, . . . for after six centuries of growth from the rudiments of liberty to its full flower, the Swiss Confederation in the present day displays the inspiring spectacle of the best governed and the best organized of all the democratic states in existence."¹⁹

While McCrackan's view of Swiss history is generally based on a critical interpretation of the sources, his evaluation of Swiss institutional development is placed within a linear and to some extent simplistic evolutionary framework. His profound admiration of Switzerland at the end of the nineteenth century derives mainly from his idealizing assessment of the Swiss political system.

II

In 1888 and 1889 McCrackan visited the *Landsgemeinde* in Altdorf, Canton Uri, and was deeply moved. "Simple and prosaic as this political act may seem," he commented,

one turns from contemplating it with the feeling of having witnessed a religious rite. Never has the state been placed on so high a plain, or the functions of government so nearly endowed with ideal attributes; for these rude peasants are more truly sovereign than any crowned ruler, and their assembly, though sprung from a seed planted in the dawn of recorded history, is neither antiquated nor outworn, but filled with the spirit of perennial youth.²⁰

The *Landsgemeinde* is thus not only seen as the symbol of genuine democracy, but idealized as a perfect political institution. McCrackan described the Forest Cantons as the oldest and at the same time as the most radical democracies in existence. In them he saw the elements of conservatism and flexibility symbiotically and naturally combined and he elevated their *Landsgemeinde* to a mythical level:

Every form of government seems to contain within itself the germ which will eventually destroy it; but the *Landsgemeinde* is as vigorous to-day, as it has ever been, and really seems more in accordance with the spirit of this age of ours, which makes for absolute self-government, than with that of previous ones. In truth, there is something in this *Landsgemeinde* which is not merely Swiss, or even Teutonic, but which answers to the aspirations of mankind in general. A book is called a classic, because it appeals to qualities in human nature which are permanent, and belong, more or less, to every age and every clime. In this sense, the *Landsgemeinde* is a classic among the forms of government, for it is the expression of pure democracy, for which humanity has always striven, and will always strive.²¹

Here McCrackan joins those who found the germ and the ideal form of democracy in ancient Teutonic political institutions, especially in the Assembly of the Agricultural Association of the Mark. The "Teutonic Hypothesis" had been established in England by E. A. Freeman and attracted many American followers in the late nineteenth century, among them also McCrackan; he claimed explicitly "that Swiss self-government, in the opinion of the writer the most perfect yet devised by any free people, is Teutonic in character, like that of England and the United States."²²

Despite his deep admiration for the *Landsgemeinde*, McCrackan was aware of its limited usefulness for his own time. Modern democratic societies, therefore, had to adapt the mechanisms of the self-governing *Landsgemeinde* to the needs of the complex industrial and urban civilization emerging at the turn of the twentieth century.

McCrackan thought that the Swiss had solved this problem on a federal level by introducing the referendum in 1874 and the initiative in 1891. This marked "the greatest advance in the direction of pure democracy which has yet been made by any modern nation," he claimed, because "nowhere in the world does government display more ability and stability, more simplicity and economy, than in Switzerland."²³

Referendum and initiative are thus presented as political instruments transforming and modernizing in an evolutionist way the tradition of six hundred years of self-government practiced in the small rural cantons of Switzerland. McCrackan rated the effect of the referendum as most gratifying; it "is above all things fatal to anything like extravagance in the management of public funds; it discerns instantly and kills remorselessly all manner of jobs, and forbids favors lavished upon one district at the expense of the rest."²⁴ McCrackan held that

Taken together, these two institutions form the most perfect contrivance, so far devised by a free people, for the conduct of self-government. They create a sort of political pendulum, which oscillates in a groove strictly marked by the constitution. They produce a steady see-saw of legislation, a continual to and fro movement, which carries certain expressions of the public will directly to the people of the legislature, and back again to the people for the verdict.²⁵

McCrackan was aware that the Swiss party system was less developed than that of the United States and that the Swiss political system did not as carefully distinguish between executive, legislative, and judiciary powers; this did not represent a weakness, however, because the people made the final decision via initiative and referendum.²⁶

He was also surprised that even politically active citizens did not know, and often did not care, who the president of Switzerland was. This was unimportant, however, as the Swiss president, unlike his American counterpart, was just another political official and McCrackan was gratified that the Swiss elected "every three years a strong, able executive board of seven men, without a popular upheaval, without the expenditure of vast sums of money, or the wholesale distribution of spoils!"²⁷ He also applauded that the federal councillors were men of ability and integrity who served their country for a small salary and normally were reelected; this guaranteed political stability and continuity.²⁸

McCrackan also viewed favorably proportional representation which had been introduced in three cantons in 1890.²⁹ Concerning Switzerland's neutrality, he observed that the right of asylum has given her great trouble, but that "at all times, the little Confederation has shown the greatest courage in ignoring foreign threats, and in interpreting her duty according to her own standards."³⁰ He also approved the increasing importance of Switzerland as a seat of international organizations and arbitration. He thought that "no more suitable country could have been found by the great powers for the discussion and safeguarding of common interests" for five reasons: "Switzerland lies in the centre of Europe, she cannot be suspected of harboring desire for conquest; her neutrality is guaranteed; her institutions are remarkably stable; and she embraces in her federal bond the Germanic and Latin races alike."³¹

While for McCrackan the *Landsgemeinde* was the political symbol of pure democracy, the institution of the *Allmend* or village common, which had been crucial in the emergence of Switzerland, also embodied its truly democratic spirit. Although he considered this system of land tenure as somewhat antiquated, he supported it since it guaranteed the Swiss communities a regular income and, by preventing the complete monopolization of land by a small class of landowners, preserved a certain degree of economic equality.³²

In comparing the Swiss military system with that of other countries, McCrackan found that it was remarkably less expensive, partly because it was a militia. What distinguished it from all other armed forces was a complete absence of class distinctions: "This model militia is democratic

to the core. When the drill is over, the officer and the private may plow in the fields together, or work in the same factory. They are real brothers in arms."³³

Being aware of the country's disadvantageous economic circumstances, McCrackan was astonished that Switzerland could successfully compete with other manufacturing nations and even had the highest per capita trade in Europe.³⁴ Yet he viewed the active role of the state in nationalizing key industries and services with ambivalence. On the one hand he acknowledged that the post office as well as the telegraph and telephone systems were managed by the central government with excellent results and yielded respectable revenues. On the other he was afraid that the drift of legislative action in Switzerland might lead towards a mild form of state socialism and feared that the Swiss people might "fail to distinguish between natural monopolies, which properly require state management, and other general industries which may safely be left to private competition."³⁵ Notwithstanding his generally progressive viewpoints, McCrackan did not plead for extended socialistic legislation which could "curtail the fundamental liberties of the citizen."³⁶

Touching on the subject of woman's suffrage, McCrackan wondered why this matter received so little consideration:

There seems to be no agitation of the question worth mentioning. The women of Switzerland, for some reason or other, accept their disfranchised position without protest. They seem content to live under laws made by others. At the same time the Swiss universities have always been open to women. . . . Only the peculiarity of the case is—that there are almost no Swiss women in the universities; the female students as a rule are Russian, American, or English. One would think that the cantons, which in the Middle Ages admitted boys of fourteen to the franchise, would not hesitate to grant the same privilege now to full-grown women.³⁷

McCrackan generally valued Switzerland's educational system. The methods of its "pioneer schoolmasters" like Pestalozzi, Fellenberg, and Gregoire Girard, had succeeded in eliminating illiteracy. Moreover, every village and city seemed to attach major importance to education; thus the saying that "the primary business of the state is to keep school" was convincingly confirmed.³⁸

In sum, McCrackan presented a most positive and often idealized image of Switzerland's political system. He also thought that it could provide solutions to American problems.

III

Like many of his politically interested contemporaries McCrackan was convinced that American politics had reached a dangerously low stage at the end of the last century. "Nothing stands between us and the tyranny of Municipal, State, and Federal bosses, as unscrupulous as any feudal lordlings in the thirteenth century," he declared,

except public opinion, imperfectly expressed by the press . . . It has become somewhat of a commonplace assertion that politics in the US have reached the lowest stage to which they may safely go. There seems to be no longer any necessity to prove this proposition, for the general conviction has gone abroad, amply justified by the whole course of history, that no democracy can hope to withstand the corrupting influences now at work in our midst, unless certain radical reforms are carried to a successful conclusion.³⁹

The assumption of an American political crisis led McCrackan to seek solutions elsewhere. Since the history of the United States and Switzerland revealed many similarities, Swiss institutions might be useful remedies for American ills. The thirteen original Swiss states had shared features with the thirteen American colonies; both had lacked a central controlling government and both had been "practically self-governing, owing only nominal allegiance to a distant supreme ruler."⁴⁰

In the nineteenth century McCrackan saw similarities between the American Civil War (1861-65) and the war of the Swiss *Sonderbund* (1847), although the latter resembled the former only in miniature. The issues involved, however, were remarkably similar:

It was that of the Federal union versus extreme states rights, of centralization as opposed to decentralization, but in both cases a deep-seated evil came to complicate the situation and embitter the two sides. In CH it was the question of the Jesuits, and in the United States the institution of slavery.

The parallel may be extended to other details, e.g., the party of Secession was recruited in both countries from that element which was least affected by progressive ideas, was most remote from the great centres, and mainly agricultural and pastoral. Even the disproportion between the resources of the two sides serves to carry out the likeness between the *Sonderbund* and the American war.⁴¹

One of the parallels most stressed by political observers on both sides of the Atlantic was the constitutional similarity of the American and the Swiss Republic. The influence of the United States constitution on the shaping of the constitution of Switzerland in 1848 became particularly apparent in the adaptation of the system of two legislative houses and the establishment of a federal tribunal. To McCrackan, a comparison between the two constitutions showed that Switzerland's had certain shortcomings and was less logical and well balanced than the American. He thought nevertheless that "if there be any virtue at all in the study of comparative politics, a comparison between the Federal constitutions of Switzerland and of the United States ought to throw into relief some features which can be of service to us."⁴²

As pointed out earlier, McCrackan considered the *Landsgemeinde* the key political instrument in the democratic tradition of Switzerland. The Massachusetts town meeting, he thought, was "almost the exact counterpart of the Swiss *Landsgemeinde*," in spite of its entirely different environment.

You have only to substitute a hall for a meadow, the bleak, unkindly scenery of a Massachusetts March for the genial glow of an Alpine May, and a good deal of Yankee dialect for *Schwizerduetsch*. . . . As the *Landsgemeinden* were the training schools for the peasants who founded the Swiss Confederation, so the New England town meeting taught political organization to the patriots of the American Revolution.⁴³

McCrackan observed the gradual abandonment of the New England town meeting with deep regret. Perhaps this device of self-government justifiably was considered to be too impractical and obsolete to match the necessities of modern America. Yet its deep political crisis could be mastered only by reviving its traditions of pure democracy, i.e., by the introduction of the initiative and referendum in the United States.

During his residence in Boston (1890-94) McCrackan actively promoted the adoption of direct democracy in the United States. In *The Arena*, whose editor Benjamin O. Flower welcomed contributions of Progressive reformers, McCrackan found a valuable medium to spread his views.⁴⁴ He wrote several articles on the democratic innovations in Switzerland, which, as he later recalled, "were the first series of papers on Direct Legislation published in a leading magazine of opinion devoted to general discussions."⁴⁵ Publications on similar subjects in other important American magazines confirmed McCrackan's reputation as an influential representative of the American political reform movement during the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁴⁶

McCrackan hoped the adoption of Swiss measures would produce analogous effects in his country. The introduction of initiative and referendum, he declared, would be

absolutely fatal to that political evil, the lobby. Bribery is too risky an investment when the people hold the deciding ballot. The Initiative tends to specialize, as well as to fortify, the work of lawmaking. Every school of thought has the opportunity to present its arguments; politics are redeemed from the sterile discussion of tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum, and become an occupation for serious men, who care very little for the tricks of party bosses, and a great deal for the eternal principles of economic, social, and political justice. For, if there be a political prophecy which it is safe to make at this time, it is that our representative system cannot remain in its present form for another decade, if the republic is to endure.⁴⁷

McCrackan advocated the introduction also of other components of Switzerland's political system. He proposed the substitution of the American majority vote by a system of proportional representation as established in the constitutions of the Swiss cantons of Geneva, Neuchâtel, Zug, and Ticino.⁴⁸

He proposed further an adaptation of the American presidency to its Swiss counterpart. Although Switzerland united "incongruous, often antagonistic elements and protected itself from foreign complications" it did not indulge

in a powerful and spectacular public head. Instead of increasing the

responsibilities and sovereign attributes of the Presidential office, as we in this country seem inclined to do under the stress of military excitement and of financial fear, let his prerogatives rather be checked and his official burdens lightened. At present none but a mental, moral, and physical giant can ever hope to fill the office satisfactorily.⁴⁹

While the Swiss president was considered to be just the chairman of an executive board, McCrackan regarded the American president as "a monarch, elected for a short reign," who could not possibly govern impartially, as he had to "forward the interests of one political party at the expense of the rest."⁵⁰

It was the monopolization of land by a few, however, which in McCrackan's opinion created the biggest danger for American democracy, as it allowed a rapid growth of economic inequality.⁵¹ Although he admired the Swiss *Allmend* system, he doubted its practical usefulness under modern industrial conditions. Nevertheless McCrackan respected the underlying principle as being immortal, because it "contributed more than any other factor towards giving every man an interest in the soil and insured genuine democracy."⁵²

Looking at the relatively low costs of its maintenance, McCrackan claimed that the Swiss army could provide a useful model for the United States: "Let us have a truly democratic and efficient article for our money," he exclaimed. "The Swiss people do not maintain a standing army. But, by a system of compulsory short service, they have perfected what may be termed without exaggeration the most efficient militia force in existence today."⁵³ Summing up his evaluation of Switzerland's history and politics, McCrackan declared:

If these incongruous, often antagonistic Cantons can meet upon some common plane and conform to some standard, can live side by side in peace and prosperity, surely the task of some day uniting the nations of the world upon a similar basis is not altogether hopeless and chimerical.⁵⁴

During the first half of the 1890s McCrackan worked intensively for political reform, both by writing and by public speaking. He particularly advocated direct democracy, such as expressed by the referendum, the initiative, and proportional representation. He was convinced that these reforms would guarantee equal opportunity and equal rights. Although these discussions gained some momentum in the 1890s, McCrackan eventually was disappointed in the public's reaction to his efforts.⁵⁵ He reached the conclusion that

humanity was more deeply oppressed by its concrete personal woes than by the abstract troubles of the nation; more engrossed in its own fears, diseases, calamities and disappointments than in the failures of governmental policies; and that any plan for general salvation must first take account of the needs of the individual.⁵⁶

This view gradually cooled McCrackan's zeal for political reform; in 1900 he joined Mary Baker Eddy's First Church of Christ, Scientist: "I

saw in Christian Science the solution for all these individual troubles, whether of the mind, body or soul, and in consequence the eventual solution also for all the troubles of the community, the nation and the world."⁵⁷ For the rest of his life, McCrackan was to work for the Christian Science Church. He was sent on a relief mission to Europe during World War I. From 1916 to 1919 he was an associate director of the *Christian Science Journal* and the *Christian Science Sentinel*, later he joined the British Military Academy for educational and relief work in Palestine where he also edited the *Jerusalem News* in 1920. McCrackan died in New York City in June 1923 at the age of fifty-nine.

IV

During his residence in Boston, where he published most of his writings on Switzerland, McCrackan became acquainted with several political reformers. Among his close friends were Thomas Bailey Aldrich, poet and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Benjamin O. Flower, editor of *The Arena*, Philipps Brooks, president of the Twentieth Century Club, an organization devoted to political reform, Edwin D. Mead, editor of the *New England Magazine*, William Lloyd Garrison, Albert Bushnell Hart, President of Harvard University, W. A. B. Coolidge, Hamlin Garland, and Henry George.⁵⁸

Hamlin Garland, who wrote an obituary for McCrackan's posthumous autobiography, characterized him as follows:

Young McCrackan appealed to me at once, both by the charm of his personality and the extent and quality of his knowledge of the Old World. As a reformer, he stood out in notable contrast to the throngs of us who knew only our own country, and not very much of that. He seemed the genial aristocrat, amusing himself with questions of economics, but as I came to know the sincerity of his convictions and his grasp on fundamentals my estimate changed.

His wide studies of Swiss history, folk-lore and government deepened my liking to admiration. His speech so fine and clear (American in the best sense) arose, I perceived, from contact with highly cultivated men and women at home and abroad. In fact he was all that I was not, and for that reason I particularly valued his companionship.⁵⁹

Garland ascertained that McCrackan remained an idealist all his life, and he always remembered him as the "intellectual aristocrat."⁶⁰

It was *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, first published in 1892, which established McCrackan's reputation. Both American and British critics reviewed the book very favorably. They not only acknowledged his long and profound study of Swiss history and politics, but also praised the distinctness of his style. Several had emphasized the need for a well-written history of Switzerland in English; McCrackan's work fulfilled that need.⁶¹ James Bryce, for example, hoped that McCrackan's book "may do much to show our people [of Great Britain], as well as yours, how much can be learned from a study of Swiss affairs."⁶²

The Rise of the Swiss Republic was not only positively reviewed,

however, but also used as a text in schools and colleges. Since McCrackan's articles on Swiss history appeared in widely circulating magazines and newspapers, his influence may have been considerable. From today's perspective, aspects of McCrackan's historical work are obsolete.⁶³ Yet he was an important American student of Swiss history and successfully presented a scientifically accurate, yet attractive account of Switzerland's past.

McCrackan's incessant appeals for the introduction of direct democracy and proportional representation in the United States made him become an influential political reformer at the end of the nineteenth century. His writings acquainted many politically interested Americans with Swiss democratic traditions and helped to create Switzerland's reputation as a model republic in American political thought.

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Notes

¹ The first two works by Americans dealing with Swiss history and the Swiss constitution are Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers, *Switzerland and the Swiss, by an American Resident* (Zurich and New York, 1875), and Andrew Fiske, "The Federal Constitution of Switzerland" (Thesis, Harvard University, 1886). Both studies, however, were of minor importance.

² See John Martin Vincent, "A Study in Swiss History," *Papers of the American Historical Association* 3 (1888): 146-64. Vincent extended this article to a study entitled *State and Federal Government in Switzerland* (Baltimore, 1891). With regard to Vincent's work on Switzerland cf. Hans Rudolf Guggisberg, "Ein amerikanischer Erforscher der Schweizer-geschichte: John Martin Vincent (1857-1939)," in *Discordia Concors: Festgabe für Edgar Bonjour* (Basel, 1968), 2:503-22. The most important American works on Switzerland in the late 1880s and early 1890s are: Bernard Moses, *The Federal Government of Switzerland: An Essay on the Constitution* (Oakland, 1889); Boyd Winchester, *The Swiss Republic* (Philadelphia, 1891).

³ John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore, 1983), 92-103. According to Higham, in about 1895 half of the American academic historians had studied in Germany (92).

⁴ Some of the most valuable studies in this context are Woodrow Wilson, *The State* (Boston, 1899); Albert Bushnell Hart, *Introduction to the Study of Federal Government* (Boston, 1891); and A. Lawrence Lowell, *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, 2 vols. (London and Bombay, 1896). All three works contain extensive chapters on the political system of Switzerland.

⁵ A selected bibliography of McCrackan's publications on Switzerland is to be found at the end of this article.

⁶ McCrackan's posthumously published autobiography—*An American at Home and Abroad: Recollections of W. D. McCrackan* (New York, 1924)—describes his life until 1900. Additional biographic information can be found in *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: 1926) 19:146, and in the obituary of the *New York Times*, 14 June 1923, 19:4.

⁷ McCrackan, *An American at Home and Abroad*, 83.

⁸ "The Real Origin of the Swiss Republic," *American Historical Association: Annual Report for the Year 1898* (Washington, 1899), 357.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 361.

- ¹¹ William Denison McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic* (Boston and London, 1892), 281.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 189.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 234-35. In this context see also 193-249.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 281-83.
- ¹⁶ William Denison McCrackan, *Romance and Teutonic Switzerland* (Boston, 1894), 2:113.
- ¹⁷ McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 322-23.
- ¹⁸ William Denison McCrackan, "Six Centuries of Self-Government," *Atlantic Monthly* 68 (Aug. 1891): 262.
- ¹⁹ William Denison McCrackan, "The Rise of the Swiss Confederation," *New England Magazine*, n.s., 4 (Aug. 1891): 784.
- ²⁰ McCrackan, *Romance and Teutonic Switzerland*, 2:187.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:188-89.
- ²² William Denison McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems* (Boston, 1894), 9-11.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 9-11.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²⁵ William Denison McCrackan, "The Initiative in Switzerland," *Arena* 7 (Apr. 1893): 549.
- ²⁶ Cf. McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 49-50.
- ²⁷ William Denison McCrackan, "A President of no Importance," *North American Review* 163 (July 1896), 120.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-21.
- ²⁹ William Denison McCrackan, "Proportional Representation," *Arena* 7 (Feb. 1893): 295.
- ³⁰ McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 355-56.
- ³¹ McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 62-63.
- ³² See McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 367-68.
- ³³ McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 73-74.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76f.
- ³⁸ William Denison McCrackan, "The Swiss and American Constitution," *Arena* 4 (July 1891): 176-77.
- ³⁹ William Denison McCrackan, "The Swiss Referendum," *Arena* 3 (Mar. 1891): 358; and McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 342.
- ⁴⁰ McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 246.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 334-35.
- ⁴² McCrackan, *Romance and Teutonic Switzerland*, 2:346. See also McCrackan, *The Swiss and American Constitutions*, 173-74.
- ⁴³ McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 5.
- ⁴⁴ Hamlin Garland introduced Benjamin O. Flower to McCrackan, whose knowledge of the political system of Switzerland was highly welcomed by the *Arena* editor: "A presentation of Direct Legislation, by one who had personally observed its practical operation, was exactly what I wanted. I had become convinced, from my reading, that in the initiative and referendum lay a practical remedy for our present crisis, but the general public was ignorant of the subject. We had lost to a great extent the splendid spirit of initiative which had marked the early days of the republic, and when any measure was proposed, the first question inevitably asked was, 'Has it been successfully tried elsewhere?' A few days later I made the acquaintance of Mr. McCrackan." (B. O. Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements of the Past Twenty-Five Years* [Boston, 1914], 62-63.)
- ⁴⁵ McCrackan, *An American Abroad and at Home*, 150.
- ⁴⁶ Consult the selected bibliography for McCrackan's articles on direct legislation. Commenting on McCrackan's work, B. O. Flower maintained: "Mr. McCrackan was one of a group of scholarly young writers whose contributions did much to make 'The Arena' a vital agency in the political, social, and economic advance movement of the last twenty-five years. He is the author of a number of books, of which 'The Rise of the Swiss

Republic' is the most pretentious. It was recognized as the best history of the Swiss people published in English." (Flower, *Progressive Men*, 63-64.)

⁴⁷ McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 22.

⁴⁸ At the first congress of the "American Proportional League" in 1893 at Chicago McCrackan presented the Swiss Free List System and endorsed its application in the United States.

⁴⁹ McCrackan, "A President of no Importance," 121.

⁵⁰ McCrackan, "The Swiss and American Constitutions," 175.

⁵¹ Cf. McCrackan, *Swiss Solutions of American Problems*, 53-59.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁵⁴ McCrackan, *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, 363.

⁵⁵ In this context McCrackan recalled the following incident: "A Boston newspaper sent a reporter to interview me on the subject of the Referendum, but my disappointment was keen when after I had talked to him for some time about Switzerland and its ways, he asked me whether Switzerland and Sweden were not the same" (*An American Abroad and at Home*, 161-62).

⁵⁶ William Denison McCrackan, *Mary Baker Eddy and Her Book* (Tamworth, NH, 1925), 139. See also McCrackan, *An American Abroad and at Home*, 162ff. In 1894 McCrackan left Boston for New York, where several family members were residing. As the President of the Manhattan Single Tax Club, McCrackan remained active in politics. From 1896 to 1900 he lectured in the Free Lectures for the Board of Education of the City of New York. Since 1892 he was a member of the American Historical Association; in 1897 he printed a special edition of *Swiss Solutions of American Problems* for the "National Woman's Suffrage Organization," which used it as a textbook. On the whole, however, McCrackan stated that the closing years of the nineteenth century "were signalized for me by one disappointment after another" (*An American Abroad and at Home*, 166-67).

⁵⁷ McCrackan, *Mary Baker Eddy and Her Book*, 139-40.

⁵⁸ See McCrackan, *An American Abroad and at Home*, 150-69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 217-18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶¹ W. A. B. Coolidge, who had published a widely approved article on Switzerland in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* stated that "for many years the lack of a fairly good Swiss history in English has been keenly felt, especially by students interested in the history of Central Europe." In his opinion *The Rise of the Swiss Republic* contributed substantially to fill this gap: "Armed with Mr. McCrackan's book for the political side of Swiss history, and with Mr. J. M. Vincent's 'State and Federal Government of Switzerland,' . . . the English student of Swiss matters will be very well equipped" (W. A. B. Coolidge, Review of *The Rise of the Swiss Republic*, *English Historical Review* 11 [Apr. 1896]: 361-64).

⁶² Letter to McCrackan, 27 October 1892; quoted in McCrackan, *An American Abroad and at Home*, 154.

⁶³ Interestingly enough the 1901 edition of *The Rise of the Swiss Republic* was reprinted in 1970. As it had not been updated, its usefulness to scholars of Swiss history today is therefore restricted.

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