

Getting to the heart of Switzerland

Manager of Stauffacher's English bookstore by day and countryside-exploring Swiss watcher by night, English expat Diccon Bewes has put pen to paper and come up with a fresh look at Switzerland that has the publishing industry raving. I met Diccon on a hot summer day in Zurich to find out what happens when you combine Swiss quirks and historic backstory, with meticulous research and a good dose of comic insight.

By Kati Clinton Robson | First published in June, *Swiss Watching: Inside Europe's Landlocked Island* has already sold out its first print run, and is sitting pretty as the summer's top seller in the English departments of Orell Füssli and Stauffacher. It's also been a top-10 bestseller (in all languages) across Switzerland at Thalia Bücher. Aside from Switzerland, the book is doing well in the UK, the United States, Germany, France and Austria, as well as globally through Amazon.

With numerous book readings and signings lined up for the fall, Diccon and his book are going from strength to strength. *Swiss Watching* condenses 700 years of Swiss history into 300 pages of entertaining and intelligent reading – scaling the peaks and exploring the valleys to not only reveal *what* makes the Swiss tick ... but also, *why* they march to their own *Guggen*-drummer.

In search of the quiet life

Diccon arrived in Switzerland in April 2005, not just “for the chocolate, of course” as he laughingly says ... but as a travel writer needing to get away from the chaotic hustle and bustle of London for a little R&R in Switzerland. Moving in with his partner in Bern, he took time to learn German and explore the countryside, before taking the helm as manager of Stauffacher's English book department.

Working in a bookshop helped Diccon see a literary hole, which he felt perfectly positioned to fill. “There were travel guides [to Switzerland], and lots of books by expats, for expats”, he says, but no books penned by travel writers about the country.

“I had three years away from writing. And as much as I love book selling, it's not overly creative,” he notes. “My grey cells, as Monsieur Poirot would've said, were getting greyer and greyer.” The epiphany came when he realised that his travel writing experience and living in Switzerland would fit very well together.

The first step to success

The ball really began rolling in 2008, when Diccon attended the Geneva Writers' Conference with the idea of trying his hand at fiction writing. However, when the instructor of his requisite fourth-selection travel-writing seminar asked the group to write

a 100-word paragraph about a culture shock they had experienced, *Swiss Watching* was well and truly born.

While other aspiring authors chose to write about trips to Egypt and South America, Diccon picked something closer to home: Imagine “going to McDonald's because it's Heidi Week”, he says to me. “What would they do to a burger for Heidi Week? Put it in gingham? Or make the box yodel when you open it? And actually, it's nothing. They just filled [the burger] with Rösti and Emmentaler cheese.”

The instructor liked his culture shock piece best, saying it was “the most readily identifiable to a reader”. Inspired, Diccon continued writing, “I had this paragraph, which became a chapter. The chapter got me an agent. The agent found me a publisher, who gave me a contract ... so, it kind of all started with one sentence in Geneva.”

Journey into the Swiss psyche

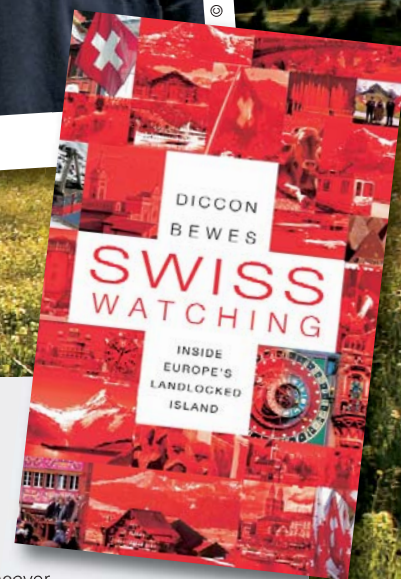
Diccon's research travels took him far and wide: from watching democracy in its purest form at the annual public vote in Appenzell (or the “Far East” as he calls it); learning history with each step on the *Weg der Schweiz* (Swiss Path) along Lake Lucerne; or examining Switzerland's neutrality, internationalism and humanitarian role among the leafy avenues of Geneva's International Quarter ... to tracking down Betty Bossi, Swiss culinary artist extraordinaire; hypothesising as to why so many locals wear red shoes; and contemplating the significance of Heidi, chocolate and cheese on the national psyche.

Along his journeys, he also chatted with locals and relentlessly questioned his Swiss friends to try and get to the bottom of the clichés and stereotypes that make up many a foreigner's perception of the Swiss.

Some of his revelations might surprise you. How about the commonly accepted belief that the Swiss don't have a sense of humour? “As I got to know Swiss people, I realised they do have a sense of humour. They do laugh; it's not a myth. They just do it in private. Humour is not a public tool: they don't use it in meetings as we would. It's a sense of space, of being polite,” Diccon explains.



Diccon Bewes and his bestseller



However, it is true that “they are very punctual. I have very few Swiss friends who are [ever] late. And they are very direct. The directness, I still find, quite direct,” he says ironically.

Fact is stranger than fiction

Diccon’s hard work is clearly evident by the number of referenced footnotes found throughout each chapter. “I wanted to put [the notations] in, because I wanted to make the difference clear between fact and my opinion.”

It’s a distinction that readers, as well as government officials, have noticed and appreciated. Only weeks after the book’s publication, the Federal Office of Migration placed *Swiss Watching* on its recommended reading list – without any prompting from either the author or the publishing house. And Diccon is now working on promotional projects with the Swiss Consulate in Scotland, as well as the director of the Swiss Tourism Board in London.

A hit with the Swiss

Reader response has been overwhelmingly positive too. “A lot of Swiss people have said to me ‘this is how they see us. This is why.’” It’s like a light turning on, he notes. Another commented that this “was the first time he ever laughed about his own country”.

One astute Swiss reader remarked that the book “mixes criticism with an obvious love for the country. It’s not making a joke about us, it’s making a joke so that we all understand each other better.” In fact, revealing cultural differences was one of Diccon’s top priorities as he read, studied and wrote: “The cultural differences were what I was trying to get at – differences that I can see, that maybe Swiss people can’t.”

In the end, he hopes readers leave with knowledge beyond the stereotypes. “To understand the real Switzerland, and enjoy learning about it – that’s what I want people to get out of [the book].”

Up next: Diccon is already researching his next travel book set in Switzerland. The subject – which focuses on travel through one specific area, as opposed to the entire country – is still top secret. But after receiving a preview, I’m pretty sure it’ll be a big hit too. Watch this space!

Editor’s review

Through painstaking research and a wicked sense of humour, Diccon really doesn’t leave any curling stone unturned on his journey to uncover the logic behind the idiosyncrasies of Europe’s fondue pot.

From Switzerland’s religious past, which still (peacefully) divides the country today, to debunking the typical (and occasionally bizarre) stereotypes, or giving readers practical (albeit tongue-in-cheek) tips to better acclimatisation, *Swiss Watching* is truly a fun and fascinating read ... whether you’ve been here for one year or 10.

Diccon told me that he wanted *Swiss Watching* to “be entertaining and informative” – a book that people learn from. Well, I’ve lived in Switzerland for eight years, and it’s been a while since I had such fun reading a book about my adopted country. I lost count of the number of times I nodded my head in agreement or exclaimed, “I wondered why that was!” or “He noticed that too?”

I believe the reader who told Diccon that the book doesn’t make jokes about the Swiss; it makes “jokes so that we all understand each other better” really hit the nail on the head. *Swiss Watching* helps make the Swiss, and Switzerland, more accessible to those of us living here, as well as those who just want to know more about the Helvetic Confederation. No expat bookshelf should be without it.

Swiss Watching, Nicholas Brealey Publishing
ISBN 9781857885484, SFr 29.90

Don’t take my word for it ... meet the author

- September 1: Bergli Books, Basel
- September 3: Orell Füssli, Zurich
- September 5: Expat Expo, Zurich
- September 8: Stauffacher, Bern
- September 24: Off the Shelf, Geneva
- October 10: Expat Expo, Geneva
- November 2: BooksBooksBooks, Lausanne

More details about upcoming events, and other musings, can be found on Diccon’s blog: <http://swisswatching.wordpress.com>

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