

Genevan science and the spirit of measurement

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The Geneva of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ranked among the most active scientific centres in Europe. The naturalist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, famous for his Alpine explorations and his ascent of Mont Blanc, the physicist Marc-Auguste Pictet, the botanist Augustin Pyramus de Candolle and many other scholars made the city's reputation.¹ Several of them belonged to the same families as the bankers and magistrates, or were related to them by marriage.

This closeness between science and finance is not without significance. It sustained a culture of measurement, observation and rigour that also permeated the conduct of business. The banker who keeps his accounts accurately, compares yields, assesses risks and records his observations shares the same intellectual discipline as the scientist. The learned societies of Geneva, moreover, brought together scholars, magistrates, merchants and bankers, who exchanged ideas and information.

Geneva's scientific culture also fostered an interest in economic questions. Political economy, a discipline then in full expansion, was taught at the Academy. The historian and economist Sismondi, whose participation in the Coppet group was mentioned in Part C, published his work on economy and society. The Italian jurist Pellegrino Rossi, a refugee in Geneva, taught law and political economy there before pursuing his career in France and Italy.² These intellectual debates nourished the financial elites' thinking on credit, money and economic development.

1 Notes

1. Swiss Alpine Club, "Horace-Bénédict de Saussure" (sac-cas.ch): Saussure (1740–1799), professor at the Academy of Geneva from 1762, in 1760 promised a reward to the first person to climb Mont Blanc (Balmat and Paccard, 8 August 1786) and himself reached the summit

on 3 August 1787; *Voyages dans les Alpes* (4 vols., 1779–1796); Wikipedia (en), “Marc-Auguste Pictet”: Pictet (1752–1825) succeeded Saussure as professor of natural philosophy in 1786, co-founded the Société de physique et d’histoire naturelle de Genève (1791) and the Bibliothèque britannique (1796); Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Candolle, Augustin-Pyramus de”. ↩

2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Rossi, Pellegrino”: settled permanently as a refugee in Geneva in 1816, citizen (bourgeois) of Geneva in 1820, “appointed professor of Roman law and criminal law at the Academy of Geneva in 1819, he was its first Catholic professor”; member of the Representative Council from 1820, rapporteur of the draft revision of the Federal Pact (“Pacte Rossi”, 1832), chair of political economy at the Collège de France (1833), assassinated in Rome on 15 November 1848. ↩

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