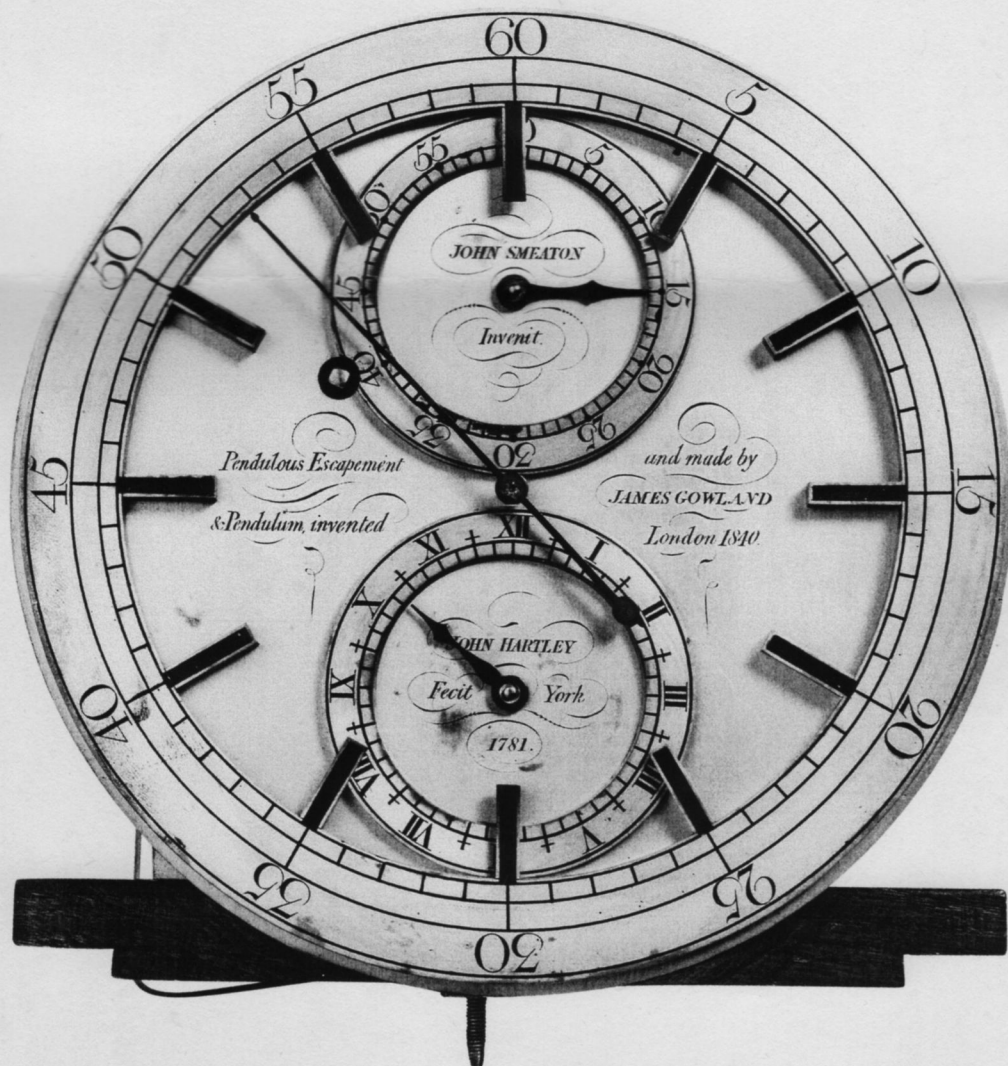


ANTIQUARIAN HOROLOGY

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Book review

Horlogers et horlogères à Besançon, 1793–1908. Un passé prêt à revivre, by Joëlle Mauerhan. Paris (Harmattan), 2018. Paperback, 24.2 x 15.6cm, pp. 245, numerous unnumbered illustrations in text. ISBN 978 2 343 15373 5. 26€.

L'Invention du luxe: Histoire de l'industrie horlogère à Genève de 1815 à nos jours, by Pierre-Yves Donzé. Neuchâtel (éditions Alphil: Collection Histoire et Horlogerie), 2017. Hardbound with dust wrapper, 29 x 24.8cm, pp. 205. ISBN 978 2 8930 122 5. 44€

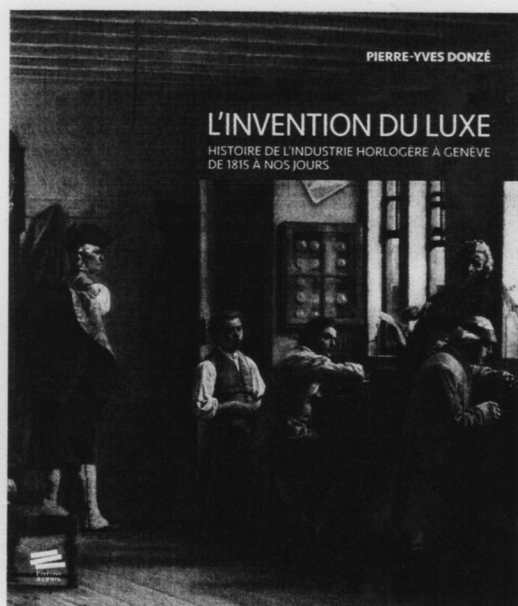
Besançon and Geneva: two horological centres just over hundred miles apart, both dependent on, and victims of, the scattered, but numerous and effective artisans of the Jura. Geneva, a European city, the seat of an old-established corporative industry in large part created by successive waves of French Protestant immigrants bringing with them skills, capital and commercial networks, that had been destroyed by the annexation of Switzerland by Revolutionary France; Besançon a provincial city the watchmaking industry of which had been created by Revolutionary France through the importation of craftsmen from Switzerland who, Protestant, were ill-received by the predominantly Catholic inhabitants. But in the nineteenth century, the two cities were not dissimilar in their dependence on the craftsmen of the 'Jura curve' (*l'arc jurasien*), for blanks and parts, concentrating their own activity on the finishing, the casing and the decoration of the watch, and on its commercialisation.

These aspects are well brought out in the two books here noticed which neatly complement each other for the nineteenth century. Despite periods of expansion in the 1830s and 1850s, watch-making in Geneva did not enjoy the same development as it did more generally in the Swiss cantons. The destruction of the *fabrique*, the corporative organisation of the Ancien Régime, which had confined manufacture to the city, led to a dispersal of manufacture into the hinterland which, combined with the steady growth of production in the Canton of Neuchâtel from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards, led to the

loss of basic manufacture in Geneva where the structure of the industry was ill-adapted to it and where there was hostility to mechanisation. In Besançon, the efforts of Laurent Megevand and George Auzière, despite government support, to both mechanise and to produce high quality watches were only partially successful – 'a long adolescence' for the nascent industry lasting into the third quarter of the century.

Both Mauerhan and Donzé offer elegant narratives of the fortunes of watches in the two cities, neatly combining immediate, specific, detail with a general account, and both recognise the need to place the local picture into the wider national and international context. This both do effectively although Mauerhan is more enlightening on the importance of international trade exhibitions to the Bisontins, than is Donzé for the Genevans, indeed he hardly mentions this major agent of commercialisation apart from some local manifestations within the city. It would however have been interesting to know if the international exhibitions provoked any response from Genevan watch companies.

Mauerhan closes her account at the dawn of the twentieth century, a period that Donzé describes with brio. She deploys with panache the famous Leroy N° 01 – 'the most complicated watch in the world' (until 1989) as the ambiguous symbol of local, artisanal creativity in the face of mechanisation and industrialisation, 'a unique object, a high symbol of the luxury that had for long been the business of horology, this watch declared the position of the artisan faced by the industrialist. It closed the period absolutely dominated by the practitioner, to open a new century also perturbed by the irruption of new technologies: sixty years later it would be brandished as a defensive weapon against electronic and quartz products' (p. 177). In this reading she joins Donzé who shows how Genevan craftsmen sought to defend traditional small workshop production in terms of the superiority of the product. In Geneva however, the defence was organised by the creation of institutions intended to encourage artisanal making by control of the precious metals used and certificates of precision (p. 39), rather than by the production of an emblematic specimen.



Where Mauerhan closes her study as Bisontin watchmaking entered into a slow, but terminal, decline, Donzé leads us through the intricate tale of the twentieth century rationalisation of horology in Geneva, the incursion of international finance, the exceptional survival of more traditional structures in the case of Longines and Patek Philippe, the creation of cartels, and the formation of groups. Into this he entwines an examination of the way in which the 'luxury' watch was invented through an idealisation of the past and false history, deployed in vigorous advertising campaigns of extraordinary scope and subtlety. In analysing this development Donzé traces its origins to the later decades of the nineteenth century, dissects the famous painting of an 'eighteenth-century' Genevan workshop by J. F. von Ziegler (1879) that adorns his binding [reproduced above] looks at company histories, the role of civic institutions in particular the museum of horology, and the role of auction houses. Missing from this forensic examination however is the phenomenon of the foundation of company museums such as Patek, Omega, Chopard, Breguet, Audemars Piguet, Parmigiani which, although not specific to Geneva, is an integral part of the marketing image that Donzé discusses. As a footnote to his work one can add that the useful booklet published by Switzerland Tourism, *Watch Valley, le pays de precision*, describing a

horology museum route from Geneva to Basle, employs much the same promotional rhetoric as the 'machines à cash' of the big business that constitutes the watch industry in Geneva today.

Both books are instructive and revealing accounts of a formative period in the world history of horology. Both are attractively produced (although both would have benefitted from maps of the regions that they discuss), but in contrasting styles. As a tool for study, Mauerhan is the more convenient. Despite a royal octavo format it can still be held easily in the hand, notes are placed where they should be, on the page, and all technical terms are keyed by an asterisk in the text to a full glossary at the end of the work. It also deploys a rich iconography of black and white illustrations, appositely chosen, placed appropriately in the text so as to complement it, and each explained by an informative, sometimes quite long, caption. Particularly remarkable is the eight-page album of high-quality photographs taken in 1908 by Jacques Boyer, which opens the book, showing different stages in case-making and assembly, the quintessential occupations of workers in the Besançon horology trade.

Donzé's volume by contrast, as befits its title, is a rather more luxurious production – a large quarto, hard bound with a dust wrapper and profusely illustrated, generally in colour, with photographs, graphs and tables. The result is very attractive, but the volume is inconvenient for reading anywhere other than at a desk, notes are placed uselessly at the end, and whereas the graphs and tables are closely integrated with the text, the illustrations seem to have been randomly chosen, are almost never referred to in the text and have uninformative two line captions. Many of them indeed seem barely relevant, responding only perhaps to a designer's wish for another illustration, than effecting any structural task in the book.

To end this notice on a carping note however, would be ungrateful. Both these books are enlightening; both are clearly written and agreeable to read. Both take us a large step forward in understanding a complex period in the development of watch-making.

Anthony Turner