



## *The Vaudois Revisited*

By Archibald F. Bennett

**O**n morning last September President James L. Barker of the French Mission and I set out from Paris. By assignment from President Alma Sonne of the European Mission we were to visit the Vaudois in their homeland amid Alpine valleys.

As the car sped across France toward northern Italy, President Barker refreshed my mind on the history of this unique and valorous people.\*

Aptly described by one author as "Israel of the Alps," the Vaudois or Waldenses are probably the oldest continuous Protestant community in the world, and their church influential among other reformed churches. By tradition they are credited with a line of pastors running back even to the time of the apostles. All other dissenter groups were crushed by the power of Rome.

Detested by popes and monarchs as teachers of dangerous doctrines, they have suffered centuries of horrible and desolating persecution, scarcely a generation escaping barbarous torture and massacre, or the fire and pillage, famine and treachery and assaults of

their vindictive encircling enemies. Burned at the stake, buried alive, stoned, sawn asunder, hanged, herded into vile and disease-laden dungeons, the repeated objects of pitiless crusades, their homes burned and possessions plundered, hunted down by bloodhounds, pursued from glen to glen, over rocks and crags and icy mountains, yet they defied their assailants, defended their rugged defiles, putting whole armies to rout, and maintained their ancient faith.

Thirty-five or more persecutions have been launched against them. Francis I ordered their extermination in 1541. In 1655, their overlord, the Duke of Savoy, issued his dread edict, proclaiming that all his Vaudois subjects must renounce their religion or be massacred. The tale of atrocities which brought death to thousands horrified all Protestant peoples. The poor Vaudois who were able to escape, concealed in their Alpine fastnesses, sent to Cromwell in England for relief. It was then that Milton, in righteous and indignant remonstrance, penned his great sonnet:

ON THE LATE MASSACRE IN  
PIEDMONT

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints,  
whose bones  
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains  
cold; Even them who kept thy truth  
so pure of old,  
When all our fathers worshiped stocks  
and stones,  
Forget not. In thy book record their  
groans  
Who are thy sheep, and in their  
ancient fold  
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that  
rolled Mother with infant down the  
rocks. Their moans  
The vales redoubled to the hills, and  
they To heaven. Their martyred  
blood and ashes sow  
O'er all the Italian fields, where still  
doth sway  
The triple tyrant; that from these may  
grow A hundred-fold, who having  
learnt thy way Early may fly the  
Babylonian woe.

(The reference in lines seven and eight, we are told, is to an actual incident. )

Cromwell, the Protestant champion, was aroused and called a general fast in England, and a national contribution of



MARGUERITE STALLE  
BARKER

£40,000 was raised to aid the sufferers. He called upon the heads of other reformed states to voice with him their condemnation of these outrages. Milton, as his Latin secretary to the council of state, wrote in powerful protest to the Duke of Savoy.

Letters have been sent us ... wherein we are given to understand, that such of your royal highness' subjects as profess the reformed religion, are commanded by your edict, and by your authority, within three days after the promulgation of your edict, to depart their native seats and habitations, upon pain of capital punishment, and for forfeiture of all their fortunes and estates, unless they will give security to relinquish their religion within twenty days, and embrace the Roman Catholic faith. And that . . . a part of your army fell upon them, most cruelly slew

several, put others in chains, and compelled the rest to fly into desert places, and to the mountains covered with snow, where some hundreds of families are reduced to such distress, that it is greatly to be feared they will in a short time all miserably perish through cold and hunger.

Touched with "extreme grief and compassion for the sufferings and calamities of this afflicted people" he called upon the duke to vouchsafe to abrogate this edict and put an end to their oppressions. To the rulers of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, Milton wrote for Cromwell:

But if he still persist in the same obstinate resolutions of reducing to utmost extremity those people (among whom our religion was either disseminated by the first doctors of the Gospel, and preserved from the defilement of superstition, or else restored to its pristine sincerity long before other nations obtained that felicity), and determines their utter extirpation and destruction; we are ready to take such other course and councils with yourselves, in common with the rest of our reformed friends and confederates, as may be most necessary for the preservation of just and good men, upon the brink of inevitable ruin, and to make the Duke himself sensible that we can no longer neglect the heavy oppressions and calamities of our orthodox brethren.

**S**o great was the terror of Cromwell's name, backed up by his threat to send forces to the rescue, that the persecution was stopped, and the surviving inhabitants of the valleys were promised restoration of their homes and freedom of worship.

But Cromwell died, and the rulers broke faith. In 1685, Louis XIV of France revoked the Edict of Nantes. This

was the signal for renewed persecution. Another horrible edict decreed that all Vaudois churches should be destroyed and every Protestant should publicly renounce his error within fifteen days under penalty of death or banishment. There were then only 15,000 of this people, with 2,500 capable of bearing arms against the combined might of France and Savoy. But from the mountains rang their cry of defiance, "Death rather than the mass!- In solemn assembly, under the leadership of a valiant pastor, Henri Arnaud, with hands raised to the sky, they swore to defend their homes and their religion to the death as their fathers had done before them.

Enemies from all quarters poured in upon them. The king of France assailed them from his side, and an armed force marched against them from Turin. For three days the embattled Vaudois valiantly withstood this sanguinary invasion and were victorious in every engagement. Against overwhelming odds and lured by false promises they were compelled to submit. Their surrender was followed by devastation



Young women in Valdese costume

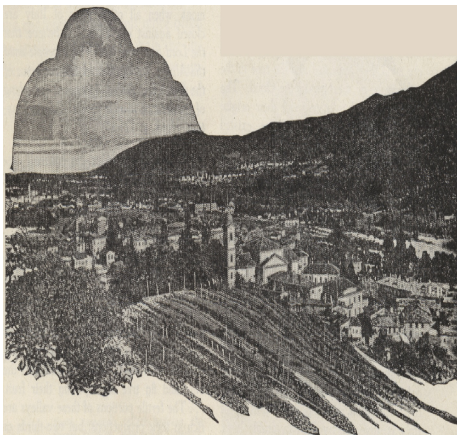
in every hamlet and unheard-of barbarities even upon women and infants. Over half the survivors, crowded to suffocation in thirteen prisons, perished of hunger and thirst and disease. After six months only three thousand remained alive.

These were pardoned and released, but banished forever from their homes and habitations. Hundreds of children

were forced from their parents to be reared as Catholics, never to see their families again. The destitute remnants crossed the mountains to Switzerland, hundreds more perishing on the roads of cold and hunger.

Three years later occurred "The Glorious Return of the Vaudois to Their Valleys." An intrepid band of exiles, eight hundred strong, led by their warrior-pastor, Henri Arnaud, assembled on the shores of Lake Geneva, and recrossing the Alps retook their homelands at the point of the sword and maintained themselves there until less than three hundred were left. At this juncture they were saved by a quarrel between France and Savoy, and the duke recalled and reinstated their exiled brethren. A portrait of the hero Arnaud bears this inscription:

I preach and fight-I have a double commission, and these two contests occupy my soul. Zion is now to be rebuilt, and the sword is needed as well as the trowel.



Panorama of Torre pellice

**O**n February 17, 1848, the king of Sardinia granted to his subjects, the Vaudois, the right to exercise their religion, to enjoy civil and political rights and to attend schools and universities.

The very next year Apostle Lorenzo Snow was called to open a mission in Italy. As we rode. I took from my pocket some notes I had copied the night before from his Autobiography, and read:

As I contemplated [while in England) the condition of Italy, with deep solicitude to know the mind of the Spirit as to where I should commence my labors, I found that all was dark in Sicily, and hostile laws would exclude our efforts. No opening appeared in the cities of Italy; but the history of the Waldenses attracted my attention.

Amid the ages of darkness and cruelty, they had stood immovable almost as the wave beaten rock in the stormy ocean. When the anathemas of Rome shook the world and princes fell from their thrones, they dared to brave the mandate of the Pope and the armies of the mighty. To my mind they appeared like the rose in the wilderness, or the bow in the cloud. The night of time has overspread their origin; but these dissenters from Rome existed ages before Luther was born. During the fierce persecutions to which they have been subjected, their limits have greatly decreased.

A few narrow valleys, which in some places are only a bow's shot in breadth, are all that now remain in their possession except the mountains by which they are engirdled. But a period of deep calm has at length arrived, and since the storm of persecution swept over Europe, they have received many privileges from the Sardinian government. Thus the way was opened only a short period before the appointment of this mission, and no other portion of Italy is governed by such favorable laws.

A flood of light seemed to burst upon my mind when I thought upon the subject, and I endeavored to procure some information in relation to this people. The librarian to whom I applied informed me he had a work of the description I required, but it had just been taken. He had scarcely finished the sentence, when a lady entered with the book. -0,- said he, "this is a remarkable circumstance; this gentleman has just called for that book." I was soon convinced that this people were worthy to receive the first proclamation of the Gospel in Italy. (Pp. 122-123.)

Arriving in Genoa, Italy, on July 1, 1850, he sent Elders Toronto and Stenhouse to visit the Protestant valleys of Piedmont. Three weeks later, in a letter to President Franklin D. Richards of the European Mission, he reported:

I have felt an intense desire to know the state of that province to which I had given them an appointment, as I felt assured it

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SHAFT OF WORDS  
By Christie Lund Coles

I SENT a shaft of words  
Out thoughtlessly,  
Words harshly cruel  
With irony.  
I saw a heart in pain,  
Hurt and bent more low  
Because my words echoed.  
Added to its woe.

I picked a gentle phrase  
Softly to be said,  
Full of faith and courage.  
One found them bread,

Found in them new hope,  
Faith to lift him up.  
Man thirsts for kindliness.  
O, fill the cup!

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would be the field of my mission. Now, with a heart full of gratitude, I find an opening presented in the valleys of Piedmont, when all other parts of Italy are closed against our efforts. I believe that the Lord has there hidden up a people amid the Alpine mountains, and it is the voice of the Spirit that I shall commence something of importance in that part of this dark nation. (Ibid., p. 121.)

A few days later he himself arrived at La Tour, in the valley of Lucerne. He wrote:

This country bears a striking resemblance to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. Piedmont is

situated at the foot of the Alps, the highest mountains in Europe. . . . The clouds often enwrap these mighty eminences, and hide their frowning grandeurs from our view. At other times they are covered with snow, while at their feet the vine and fig tree are ripening their fruit. . . . The fertile portions of these valleys are rich in their productions; but two-thirds or more present nothing but precipices, ravines, and rocky districts, or such as have a northern aspect. The inhabitants are far too numerous for the nature and products of the soil. They are often compelled to carry mould on their backs to form gardens amid the barren rocks. (Ibid., p. 127.)

I felt assured that the Lord had directed us to a branch of the house of Israel, and I was rejoiced to behold many circumstances that reminded me of those with whom I had been associated in the valleys of the West. We endeavored to lay a foundation for future usefulness in silently preparing the minds of the people for the reception of the Gospel, by cultivating friendly feelings in the bosoms of those by whom we were surrounded. (Ibid., p. 128.)

On September 6, Joseph Grey, the three-year-old son of their host, lay at the point of death, reduced to a skeleton. Fully awake to the position of the missionaries, Elder Snow called upon the Lord to assist them. Next day they fasted and retired to the mountains to pray. As they left, the cold perspiration of death covered the child's body, and the father whispered, -Il mœurtil- (He is dying!) They called upon the Lord in solemn, earnest prayer to spare the life of the child. Returning in the afternoon they administered to the

child, and he recovered. To the rejoicing parents Elder Snow said, "The God of heaven has done this for you."

On September 19 they organized a branch of the Church in Italy and began active missionary labors, in impressive manner.

We ascended a very high mountain, a little distance from La Tour, and having taken our position on a bold projecting rock, we sang praises to the God of heaven, and offered up the following prayer:

. . . In Thy name, we this day lift into view before this people and this nation the ensign . . . of Thy kingdom once more to be established among men. . . . From the lifting of this ensign may a voice go forth among the people of these mountains and valleys, and throughout the length and breadth of this land, and may it go forth and be unto thine elect, as the voice of the Lord, that the Holy Spirit may fall upon them imparting knowledge in dreams and visions concerning this hour of their redemption. (Ibid., pp. 130-131.)

Here now were we two, almost exactly ninety-seven years later, on our way to revisit the scene of the labors which followed that solemn dedication.

President Barker told how in succeeding months and years numbers of Vaudois families were gathered into the Church, including his own grandparents and his mother. John Daniel Malan was the first baptized convert, on October 27, 1850, "opening a door which no man can shut," as Elder Snow expressed it. The Cardons, Stalles, Gaudins, the Beuses, and the Chatelains followed, with many others, represented in America today by a noble lineage.

**N**IGHT fell upon us as we entered Switzerland. On September 11, we crossed the St. Gothard Pass through mountains of imposing grandeur

and over winding, zigzag roads and hairpin curves, thence speeding along the level roads of the fertile Po Valley. Our itinerary called for us to remain that night in Milan. Both of us felt the urge to push on, and in this event it was well that we did.

From Turin the next morning early we drove to Torre Pellice, the Italian form of the La Tour of President Snow, the chief village of the Vaudois. It was a market day, and the crowds were out on the street. We were impressed with the large percentage of blond complexions among them. Surely persecution had indeed made them a distinct race.

Before leaving our hotel room President Barker and I had prayed for guidance in the important task ahead, that we might secure permission to microfilm the records of all these Vaudois parishes. On our way we then planned to go first to the parish of Prarustin, the birthplace of President Barker's mother, Marguerite Stalle. With good fortune we might find the pastor still there who twenty years before had helped obtain Brother Barker's genealogy of his mother's family. From the pastor we might learn if there was some official in their church who might grant us permission to copy all the parish registers, and thus save the effort of visiting each pastor in turn. Thus we reasoned.

In the car we followed a narrow and tortuous cart trail up the steep mountain-like hill to Saint Barthelemy, a cluster of houses forming the center of the parish. We met the pastor, Umberto Bert, a young man, who cordially invited us into his simple office, and listened sympathetically to our appeal for per mission to film the registers. He was highly interested to learn that President Barker's mother had been born in his parish, and brought in for our inspection a number of the registers. In one of them was found the baptism or christening of Marguerite Stalle in 1850. He himself favored the filming of these precious church books which had survived the periods of persecution, and told us that

fortunately the moderateur or primate of all the Vaudois churches in Italy was right then in Torre Pellice, and would have the authority to speak for all the eighteen parishes.

Led by President Barker we climbed the steep hillside, up and ever upward, till at length we gazed upon the ruins of the home where his mother had been born. Here in November 1855, President Franklin D. Richards and two other elders took refuge from a mob. The Stalle family fed them on goat's milk and bread and butter and cheese. As they left, President Richards told Sister Stalle to prepare to leave for Zion. That same year she sailed for Zion with her husband and their children and a group of neighbor converts.

From that eminence, we had a commanding view of the valleys and of the steep hillsides with rock terraces. "Each year," said President Barker, "these mountain folk on the higher Alps had to carry their eroded soil in baskets on their backs up the hill, and spread it in its original location. They lived from the chestnuts, grapes, figs, and other fruits they cultivated, together with the products of their few sheep and goats and the culture of the silkworm."

He told also of how his grandparents had joined one of the first handcart companies. Disease had sapped the strength of the father of the family. He became helpless and had to be put in one of the wagons. One day he told his wife he would never reach the valley but predicted that once they arrived, no one of them would ever lack for bread; and some day their daughter Margaret would be in easy circumstances. When they looked upon him later in the wagon, he was dead. They wrapped his body in a sheet and placed it in a grave between two layers of sagebrush.

**B**ACK in Torre Pellice we called upon the former pastor of Prarustin, Auguste Jahier, now retired. When he saw President Barker, he recognized him immediately and received us into his home with every

mark of courtesy and deference, introducing us to his delightful family. We told them the story of microfilming, and they showed real interest. When we indicated our desire to see the moderateur, he willingly accompanied us to that dignitary, and even assisted us in urging the importance of having the records copied for preservation. The moderateur, M. Virgilio Sommani, said he should like to present the proposal to La Table Vaudoise or the executive governing committee of the church, which would again be in session in the morning. "Come back at ten in the morning," he said, "and I will have an answer for you."

Next morning, prior to that hour, we halted our car on the outskirts of Torre. As we sat there, we read once again excerpts from the Autobiography of Lorenzo Snow, when a branch of the Church was first organized here, nearly a century before.

We ascended a very high mountain, a little distance from La Tour, and having taken our position on a bold projecting rock, we sang praises to the God of heaven. . . .

There before us was Mont Vaudelin (Monte Vandalino in Italian ) and there plainly visible was Castaluzzo, like a tiny castle, the bold, projecting rock of his account. We read further:

Elder Snow proposed that this mountain be known among the people of God, henceforth and forever, as Mount Brigham, and the rock upon which we stood the Rock of Prophecy.

For here he had predicted the great future of the gospel in Italy.

On February 24, 1851, two young Vaudois were to be baptized. Elder Jabez Woodard reported:

It rained and snowed amain, and the atmosphere was so dense that we could not see distinctly a little way ahead. But as we

descended towards the Angrogna River, a singular scene was presented: the clouds were suddenly rent asunder, as if they had been a sheet of paper, and the side of Mount Brigham was visible, in a moment, from the top to the bottom. I exclaimed, "The veil over Italy has burst," and yet, at the instant, I knew not what I was saying. I stood paralyzed with the magnificent views which opened on every side; then with a prayer to Israel's God, we entered the stream. (Ibid., pp. 177-178.)

On a later date, when the gospel had taken root, Elder Snow wrote:

. . . more favorable opportunities now seem to present themselves, and the Book of Mormon will lend its powerful aid in building up the Church.... it was no small pleasure to find it welcomed by the Saints in Italy as a heavenly treasure. . . . Nor can I express the delight which I experienced in gazing upon Mount Brigham, on whose rocky brow we had organized La Chiesa di Gesu Christo dei Santi degli Ultimi Giorni, in Italia. The Waldenses were the first to receive the Gospel, but by the press and the exertions of the Elders, it will be rolled forth beyond their mountain regions. (Ibid., p. 209.)

And again:

We have here no temple-no building made by human hands, but the mountains tower around us-far above all edifices. . . . On Sunday, the twenty-fourth of November, we ascended one of these eminences which seem to occupy a position between earth and sky, and which, on a former occasion, we had named -Mount Brigham." During our tedious ascent, the sun shone forth in all

its brightness; but in such parts as were shaded, we found snow on the ground, and many a craggy peak and rocky summit on every side were white with the snowy fleeces of winter.

Having reached the place we sought, we gazed with rapture on the enchanting scenes of surrounding nature. Before us was a plain so vast that it seemed as if immensity had become visible. . . . Light and shade produced their effect in that magnificent picture, in a surprising degree; for while the clouds flung their shadows on one part, another was illuminated with the most brilliant sunlight as far as the eye could reach.

But there was one hallowed reflection which threw all around a brighter lustre than the noontide firmament: it was in that place, two months before, that we organized the Church of Jesus Christ in Italy. If we had stood upon a pavement of gold and diamonds, it would not have produced an impression like the imperishable remembrance of that sacred scene.

Amid the sublime display of the Creator's works, we sang the praises of his eternal name. (Ibid., pp. 173-174.)

What hymns they sang with full hearts is not recorded, but it would have been highly appropriate had they sung President Snow's own hymn. In thinking of the Vaudois he wrote about this time:

The following hymn expresses the feelings engendered by their romantic situation:

For the strength of the hills we bless  
Thee, Our God, our fathers' God:

Thou hast made Thy children mighty  
By the touch of the mountain sod.  
Thou hast fixed our ark of refuge,  
Where the spoiler's foot ne'er trod;

For the strength of the hills we bless  
thee, Our God, our fathers' God.

We are watchers of a beacon,  
Whose light must never die:  
We are guardians of an altar,  
'Midst the silence of the sky.  
The rocks yield founts of courage,  
Struck forth as by thy rod;  
For the strength of the hills we bless  
thee.  
Our God, our fathers' God.

This beautiful and stirring hymn, revised to apply to the mountains of Zion in the West, has long been printed in our hymnbooks with the words "Altered by Edward L. Sloan" in lieu of the name of the original author.

Subdued in our feelings reminiscent of the blessings of the past and the glory of the future, convinced that unseen forces were aiding us mightily, we drove on into Torre Pellice. With Pastor Jahier we ascended once more the stairs to the meeting place where La Table was in session. He rapped on the door. Moderateur Sommani came out, smiling a warm welcome. He took us into his office and had us sit down. We were watching his every move intently. Upon his desk was a typed official letter. He reached for his pen, signed the document, stamped it with his official seal, and handed it to us triumphantly. We read, in French, his good message (see box, page 13 ).

We thanked each other profusely, and set out on our return journey, happy in the complete success of our undertaking. In a day and a half we had achieved what might have consumed days of time. Had we tarried a night in Milan this fortunate result would have been of necessity delayed, for the next day was Sunday.

Back at the Jahier home we said our good-byes and adieus and au revoirs amid every manifestation of friendship. Pastor Jahier graciously tendered us one of the histories of the Vaudois which he had written. Finally we closed the doors of the car and drove away "with many a thanks and many a backward bow" on their part and on our own.

Next spring, when mountain passes are open, we hope to have a photographer accompany President Barker to the three Protestant valleys of the Piedmont, and copy the Vaudois records for preservation.

## The improvement Era Janary 1948

### TAVOLA VALDESE

TORRE PELLICE

Authorization is given Mr. Archibald F. Bennett, Secretary and Librarian of the Genealogical Society of Salt Lake City, to photograph the Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths of the Vaudois Parishes, with the approbation of the Parishes themselves.

This concession has not only the objective of favoring in America the establishment of a Library which will receive the vital records of all the Evangelical Churches of the world, but also that of furnishing us with positive copies of all the Registers, so that we should be able to reproduce them entirely in case the originals should be destroyed, for any cause whatsoever.

*Le Moderateur  
de l'Eglise Vaudoise*

VIRGILIO SOMMANI

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Footnotes:

1. \*Dr. Daniel B. Hill Richards, who served as a missionary in Europe for ten years, wrote an extensive history of the Vaudois, and also of the establishing of the Italian Mission by President Lorenzo Snow, then a member of the Council of the Twelve, in his *The Scriptural Allegory*. This book was published by the Magazine Printing Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, in April 1931.
2. Behind Torre Pellice lies Mount Vaudelin with its bold, projecting rock, Castaluzzo, renamed by Elder Lorenzo Snow: Mount Brigham and the Rock of Prophecy, respectively.