These great men who made Geneva

Fierce upholder of a certain outlook, a small town destined by its history to become the city of Nations, Geneva has always been a welcoming place. From the XVIth century it attracted many victims of religious wars and persecutions in Europe, and just as many inquisitive onlookers and scholars due to its liberal ideas. The father of the Reformation and that of the Russian revolution, an Italian adventurer and a philanthropist who founded the Red Cross, the authors of *L’Emile* and *Candide*, Piaget, Le Corbusier, Jaques-Dalcroze, the inventor of modern topography and the creator of the famous "Oyster" watch... So many men and women, either from Geneva or foreign, who have contributed to the economic, cultural and scientific influence of Geneva.

XVIth century

A century of austerity

"All citizens are banned from using gold or silver, embroidery (...) to embellish their clothes. No one may pass through town after nine o'clock without a candle, under penalty of being imprisoned".

Jean Calvin (1509-1564)

Jean Calvin disembarked in Geneva in 1536, the year that the city sided with the Reformation. With Farel, de Bèze and Knox at his sides, he introduced a legal code, reorganised the Church, instituted a disciplined theocratic regime and opened the College and the Academy, which made Geneva the true "Rome of the Reformation". Persecuted Protestants flocked here and the city's population doubled in ten years. Geneva owes much to Calvin – its influence in Europe, a certain outlook and even its watchmaking reputation. By banning jewellery, the reformer in fact encouraged the jewellers to turn to this more useful renowned product. This led the German writer Ernst Jünger to write four centuries later: "Geneva is the city of watchmakers. Rationalism must be deeply rooted in the landscape – I find the taste of it in the local wines, the vins jaunes, which are full-bodied and cause a particular and cold intoxication."

XVIIIth century

A century of prosperity

"With this great mirror of a lake and this sparkling azure river, Geneva has two skies".

Jules Michelet (1798-1874)

Due to the thousands of refugees that it took in during the XVIIth century, Geneva became integrated into international trade networks. From the XVIIIth century banking became one of the linchpins of its economy, dominated by watchmaking. Due to the physician Horace-Bénédict de Saussure and the chemist Henri-Albert Grosse, the city became a major scientific centre. The former was also a famous climber and scaled Mont Blanc in 1787. The latter founded the Physics and Natural History Society and invented the sparkling drink Schweppes, launching into the production of artificial mineral waters with the jeweller Johann Jacob Schweppes.

However, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who best personifies the spirit of Geneva, combining the arts, sciences and ethics. He grew up in the district of Saint-Gervais where the skilled watchmakers, including his father, were clustered. "Jean-Jacques, he said to me, love your country. Do you see these good people of Geneva? Joy and harmony reign among them.
You are a citizen of Geneva; one day you will see other peoples (...), but you will never find their equals". In the meantime, the aristocracy monopolized political and economic power and the city was shaken by revolts. Fearing the revolutionary words of Rousseau, the authorities burnt his works and sentenced him to exile.

Geneva attracted nothing less than provocateurs. Voltaire lived here and received the most eminent figures, including his protégé, Giovanni Giacomo Casanova. In his Mémoires, the Venetian libertine describes in detail the time spent in the company of two ladies from Geneva, as charming as they were devoid of inhibition. Voltaire was also an admirer of Jean-Etienne Liotard – "the painter of the truth", as he called him – who was the Geneva portraitist of the courts and the intelligentsia. Germaine de Staël, daughter of the Geneva banker Jacques Necker, minister of King Louis XVI, also received a number of illustrious figures. "Geneva is a city where English is too well spoken", Napoleon, who annexed it in 1798, liked to say.

XIXth century
A cultural century
"What will surely persist, is the opinion that Geneva is a real power."

Charles Pictet-de Rochemont (1755 – 1824)

When Napoleon fell, Geneva wanted to become part of the Swiss Confederation again. This wish was fulfilled due to the Geneva diplomat Charles Pictet-de Rochemont, who also obtained recognition of Switzerland's neutrality from the great powers. Under the direction of the engineer Guillaume-Henri Dufour, the city was modernised – the Bergues and Coulouvrenière bridges are due to him. He also drafted the map of Switzerland on a scale of 1:100,000, which served as a model for the world's cartographers. Furthermore, with Henry Dunant, he contributed to the creation of the Red Cross. However, it is to Dunant, future winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, that we owe the first Geneva Convention, guaranteeing the rights of peoples during conflict.

The massive influx of foreign workers transformed the city. In the working-class districts, revolution broke out, led by the radical James Fazy from Geneva who drew up the constitution of 1847. Increasingly cosmopolitan, the population of Geneva grew from 38,000 to 60,000 inhabitants between 1850 and 1870. Attracted by its liberal ideas, the cultural elite began to move here. The eminent German doctor Carl Vogt became a citizen of Geneva, the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler settled here, Montesquieu published several of his works here, Byron completed the third canto of his "Childe Harold" here, Mary Shelley gave life to the character Frankenstein here, Stendhal talks about it in his Mémoires d’un touriste, Balzac wrote one of his Contes drolatique here, Franz Liszt taught at the Conservatoire, Dostoievski drafted most of L’idiot here, Richard Wagner composed a part of Siegfried and Tristan and Isolde here and Rodolphe Toepffer from Geneva invented the comic strip here, by sketching the shortcomings of society.

XXth century
Geneva at the heart of the world
"She was enthusiastic about this little country, so wise and solid. (...) She admired the purity of Lake Geneva. "Even their water is honest", she said".

Albert Cohen (1895 - 1981), Le Livre de ma mère
"Unlike other cities, Geneva is without pomposity. Paris is not unaware that it is Paris, decorous London knows that it is London. Geneva hardly knows that it is Geneva", said the Argentinean writer and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Jorge Luis Borges, who took refuge here with his family from 1914 to 1919, studied here and came to spend the last years of his life here.

In 1911, Zino Davidoff's father fled Russia and opened a tobacconist shop on Boulevard des Philosophes. One of his first customers was none other than Lenin, himself a refugee. In the family shop, Zino opened a cigar cellar – an unprecedented initiative and the beginning of an international success story. In 1920, the creator of the Rolex watch, the German Hans Wilsdorf, moved to 18, rue du Marché, from where the Rolex "Oyster" was created, the first waterproof watch. Fifty years later, Swatch also originated in Geneva. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, the inventor of eurhythmics, and Jean Piaget, the famous child psychologist, both of Swiss nationality, both taught in Geneva. The son of a local delicatessen, the actor Michel Simon made his debut on the boards here. The writer Albert Cohen, who studied here, returned to Geneva as an international civil servant and adopted Swiss nationality. In the meantime, the American President Thomas Wilson settled in the former Hôtel National – now Palais Wilson – the headquarters of the League of Nations. The director Henri Verneuil, charmed by the Lake Geneva area, came here every year for... 60 years! The actor Richard Burton came to spend the end of his life here. "Of all the cities in the world, of all the homelands that a man seeks to earn, Geneva seems to me to be one of the most likely to bring happiness", wrote Jorge Luis Borges, who died here in 1986.

Geneva in ten key dates:

58 BC: Genava is first recorded in history with Julius Caesar who mentions it for the first time in his "Commentaries on the Gallic War".

350 AD: The bishop of Vienna founds the Church of Geneva.

443: The Burgundians occupy Geneva and make it their primary capital, strengthening the city's political role.

1032: Geneva is annexed to the Holy Roman Empire. The imperial eagle joins the key of the Bishop Prince on its coat of arms.

1526: Geneva, Bern and Fribourg sign a treaty of combourgeoisie which announces the end of the reign of the Bishop, the emergence of an autonomous seigneury and the appearance of a new body, the Conseil des Deux-Cents, precursor to the Great Council.

1536: Geneva adopts the Reformation and Calvin imposes his influence on all aspects of Geneva life.

1602: During the night of 11 December, the Duke of Savoy attacks Geneva by surprise. His troops are driven back and forced to recognise independence of the Geneva people, after two centuries of battle. This is an episode that is commemorated each year.
1815: Geneva becomes the 22nd Swiss canton and ceases to be a State whose citizens must all be Protestant.

1863/64: Henry Dunant founds the International Committee of the Red Cross.

1919: Geneva becomes the headquarters of the League of Nations, then the European headquarters of the United Nations in 1946.

**Information:**

Tourist Office  
Rue du Mont-Blanc 18  
Tel. +41 22 909 70 70  
[www.geneve-tourisme.ch](http://www.geneve-tourisme.ch)

Press: Isabelle Hesse  
Tel. +41 22 909 70 82  
mailto:hesse@geneve-tourisme.ch

Cimetière des Rois  
Many figures, from Calvin to Borges, are buried in the Cimetière des Rois.  
[www.cimetieredesrois.ch](http://www.cimetieredesrois.ch), mailto:geneve@espritdegeneve.ch