

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THINGS GERMAN: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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The Jefferson scholar Carl Becker states that Thomas Jefferson "was familiar with all the ideas of his time. . . . There was indeed scarcely anything of human interest that was alien to his curious and far-reaching intelligence."¹ Some eminent Jefferson scholars say basically that Jefferson had very few contacts with things German. Because Germany regained political and intellectual prominence among the leading nations of Europe during Jefferson's lifetime, the temptation to test Becker's claim and those scholars' assertion was irresistible. This paper relates some of the first results of that investigation.

At some time during Jefferson's youth or young manhood, the Virginian came close to learning German. A small piece of cardboard with the German texts of some song stanzas survives. Below each line is a labored, literal translation into English, undated, written in the hand of the young Jefferson.² In Philadelphia at the Continental Congress of 1775, John Adams was told by James Duane that Jefferson professed a desire to learn the language. Several times later in his life, however, he stated simply and without regret that he knew no German.

Even without a knowledge of the language, Jefferson had many contacts with things German. In emphasizing the influence of English philosophers in Jefferson's political thinking, scholars have usually overlooked German sources and contributions. As a student and later a practitioner of law he sought the origins of legal practices in the life of what he called his Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Although he used the term "Anglo-Saxon" exclusively, he was aware that these origins were Germanic. His favorite among the Whig historians, Paul de Rapin, clearly speaks of the Germanic origins of the English Anglo-Saxons.³ In the Whig pamphleteer Thomas Gordon's translation of Tacitus, Jefferson read of "Germanic democracy": the practice of electing monarchs and leaders. He used the precedents he found in these Germanic/Anglo-Saxon origins as examples of a federative system (*Commonplace Book*,⁴ pre-1774), to argue for America's right to independence (*Declaration of Independence*, 1776), and, as a Delegate in Virginia, in his legal reforms (c. 1778). He wrote in his *Commonplace Book*, probably sometime between 1774 and 1776: "All Europe is beholden to the Northern Nations for introducing or retaining a constitution of government far excelling all others we know."⁵ Among contemporary political philosophers Jefferson knew and cited the works of the German Samuel Pufendorf, whose writings on natural law were widely influential among Americans, and Emeric de Vattel, a French Swiss who was educated at Basel where he studied Leibniz and Wolff and who was later employed by the court of Saxony. Pufendorf held that all men were born free and Vattel that all men were by nature equal.

Jefferson's knowledge of then current intellectual activity in Germany

was uneven. In 1800 he supplied Bishop Madison, President of William and Mary, a good analysis of the Illuminati, that short-lived, late eighteenth century movement of republican free thinkers, in which he called Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the movement, an "enthusiastic philanthropist" and considered Weishaupt's secrecy necessary in tyrannous Germany.⁶ On the other hand, Jefferson does not seem to have known of the struggle for liberty and governmental reform carried on by various German journalists and intellectuals which was so basically akin to what he and his fellow Americans won.

Although he professed to have bought all the important foreign works on America, he owned only three works of the German historian-geographers who produced the best works on America of the period. More surprising is that he owned no work by the most outstanding of these Americanists, Christoph Daniel Ebeling, with whom he corresponded.

As far as education is concerned, there is clear contact. For example, Jefferson read about the revolutionary Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in American periodicals. Pestalozzi's disciple Joseph Neef came to America to found a Pestalozzi school and Jefferson acknowledged by letter receipt of Neef's book *Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education . . .* (1808).⁷ Jefferson's young Virginia friend Joseph Carrington Cabell, who was so instrumental in helping convince the legislature to approve the university at Charlottesville, may well have visited Pestalozzi in 1805 but certainly bought his works. For all this, it is surprising that Jefferson, who early in his public career (Delegate, c. 1778) conceived a comprehensive educational system for Virginia, showed no interest in Pestalozzi's ideas.

Jefferson's taste in architecture ran strongly but not exclusively to the classical. In 1788 he traveled through Germany, mostly along the Rhine, and he found that region the most picturesque and romantic country of his travels. This reaction may explain the astonishing fact that he did not remark on any of the truly impressive examples of Gothic and Romanesque style along the Rhine except the spire of the cathedral in Strasbourg which he called the handsomest in the world. What did interest him was the castle at Heidelberg which he called the most noble ruin he had ever seen. When he later did include an example of Gothic in the plan for his garden at Monticello, he picked a small "temple or rather portico" from a German pattern book.

In spite of the Werther craze and the Kotzebue fad and other exposures, Jefferson remained immune to German literature. In 1797 the English author Herbert Croft sent Jefferson a copy of his book *A Letter, from Germany, to the Princess Royal of England; on the English and German Languages* (1797) in which he attempted to call attention to the German language and literature. Jefferson's reply focused mostly on the linguistic aspects but only to the extent of mentioning where Croft is in agreement with his own ideas.⁸ In 1814 in reply to John Adams' query as to whether the Virginian had read any Goethe, Jefferson answered "Never!"⁹

In Jefferson's Albemarle whose county seat was named for Charlotte Sophie of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, there were very few Germans and none of prominence. Neither Jefferson nor his friend James Madison mentioned their Lutheran neighbors of the prosperous nearby Mount Hebron settlement. Jefferson hardly took occasion—personally, as governor, nor as author of *Notes on the State of Virginia*—to notice any Virginia Germans.

Before Jefferson went abroad, he did have two associations with non-

Virginia Germans. His contact with some of the high-ranking officers of the so-called Hessian (actually Brunswick) prisoners interned near Charlottesville (1779-1780) was extremely pleasant. They all enjoyed each other's company, music, conversation, and philosophical discussions but Jefferson shows no evidence of gaining a respect for German culture from this particular contact.

The following year (1780) Jefferson's encounter with the Prussian-trained professional soldier Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben was far less pleasant. During the general's stay in Virginia, disagreement quickly arose between himself and the state government, including Jefferson, who was then governor. There were many points of contention: mobilization, supply, fortifications, strategy, and the general's judgment. If we could only read Jefferson's mind rather than have to infer from his carefully worded letters, we would be able to understand his feelings about the incompatibility between philosophical doctrinaire and practical soldier, first term democrat and veteran product of Prussian militarism.

In 1784 Jefferson arrived in Paris to join the American commission which sought to negotiate treaties of amity and commerce with European nations. Of all Paris including the *philosophes*, Jefferson liked the Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm the best. He considered him "the pleasanter and most conversable" of the Paris diplomatic corps.¹⁰ A native of Regensburg, the Baron was considered the leading critic of art and literature and throughout his life he undertook to introduce Germany and France to each other's literature. Jefferson remained silent on whatever success Grimm had introducing him to German literature.

In April of 1788 Jefferson returned from Amsterdam to Paris via Germany.¹¹ Aside from the architectural remarks already mentioned, he took note of such local specialities as Westphalian ham and Moselle and Rhine wine. Twice he commented on the discernible influence of sovereign upon population: first at the Dutch-Prussian border where he was impressed with the "effect of despotism on the people," and again in Baden where he said the Margrave must be an "excellent sovereign if we are to judge from the appearance of his dominions." He was interested in two historic battle grounds: the site where Varus was defeated by the Germanic tribes and Bergen, where the French defeated the Prussians in 1759. He found the Rhine landscape reminiscent of parts of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and, though he himself did not see the Rhine between Coblenz and Bingen, he recommended it as reputed to be "the most picturesque scenes in the world." Except for the Baron von Greismar, a friend from the pleasant days with the Convention Troops in Charlottesville, the only Germans with whom he had real conversations were innkeepers, wine merchants, and his valet in Frankfurt. If his interest in Germany had been greater he would not have undertaken this trip on the spur of the moment but certainly have obtained advice and letters of introduction from his acquaintances in Paris.

Even as Secretary of State (1789-1791), Vice-President (1797-1801), and President (1801-1809) Jefferson continued to have contact with Germany. Among several pieces of correspondence relating to German immigration are Jefferson's letters of 1792 in which he was negotiating the procurement of Palatine settlers for his Virginia lands. Tourists like William Maclure, who emigrated from Scotland and is considered the father of American geology, wrote him their observations of Europe. Maclure mentioned the similarities he saw in the Rhine and American landscapes

(1801).¹² He described crops and agricultural techniques and suggested those which he thought might adapt well in America. Maclure sent Jefferson some seeds from London wrapped in "an abstract of Kantian philosophy which is much in fashion though uncomprehensible" to Maclure himself and anyone he had met.

As President, Jefferson met Johann Georg Rapp (1804), the German-born religious leader and founder of the communistic Harmony Society, and referred his request for special terms in purchasing lands for his followers to the Secretary of State. In 1804 he entertained Alexander von Humboldt at the President's house. The German was on his return trip to Europe after his stay in Spanish America and Jefferson seemed mostly interested in what von Humboldt could tell him about the lands of the Louisiana Purchase (1803). Although the two corresponded for some time, Jefferson asked little and learned little about Prussia from von Humboldt.

Jefferson was an interested observer of the political events in Europe but found little in these machinations to inspire his admiration. His life-long hope with regard to absolutistic states among which he numbered Prussia and Austria was that they would fall and liberty would spread in Europe. In 1810 he frankly called Joseph II of Austria really crazy and Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia a "mere hog in body as well as in mind."¹³ A year later he praised America for having no involvement in the "mad contests and ravings of peppercot politicians," and saw that no European power including the German ones had retained its honor.¹⁴

Before George Ticknor, the scholar and Harvard professor of modern languages, went to study at the university in Göttingen, he visited Jefferson at Monticello in 1815. That same year his long letters to Jefferson were filled with information about and praise of German university education, scholarship, intellectual achievement, and especially literature.¹⁵ Jefferson had requested Ticknor to buy him classical texts in English editions. Ticknor, having found German scholarship and editions superior, suggested Jefferson buy them instead. Jefferson followed the younger man's advice, also found them superior, and recommended German texts from then on.

In 1818 Jefferson made the following statement to the Virginia Senate in support of his plan for language study at the university:

. . . the German [language] now stands in a line with that [i.e. the languages] of the most learned nations in richness of erudition, and advance in the sciences. It is too of common descent with the language of our own country, a branch of the same original Gothic stock and furnishes valuable illustrations for us.

But in this point of view the Anglo-Saxon is of transcendent value. . . .¹⁶

These words seem to combine Jefferson's earlier ideas about Anglo-Saxon with Ticknor's report of the intellectual attainments of Germany.

In the same year Ticknor declined Jefferson's offer of the professorship of modern languages (French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Anglo-Saxon) in Charlottesville, the young New Englander suggested the German-born, Göttingen-trained Georg Blaettermann, who in fact did get the position. Blaettermann was one of only two German-trained professors appointed under Jefferson. The other was Robely Duglison, a Scot, who studied and received his M. D. at the university in Erlangen.

Becker's statement about Jefferson's "familiarity with all the ideas of his time" appears to be overgenerous, most obviously in the case of German

literature. Jefferson was the first American to return intellectually to the Anglo-Saxon origins. He did recognize fully the advances of German textual scholarship. The assertion that Jefferson had little contact with things German appears to be outright inaccurate. Throughout his life he did enjoy a varied and constant contact with things German, but it is disappointing indeed that he did not bring his "curious and far-reaching intelligence" to bear on more of them.

(Text of paper read at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, Washington, D. C., November 1977.)

¹ "What is still Living in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, LXXXVII, 3 (1943), 201

² AD, in the Thomas Jefferson Papers at the University of Virginia Library. I am most grateful to the staff of the Manuscripts Division, Alderman Library, for their kind help and making available to me this and numerous other materials.

³ H[arold] Trevor Colbourn, "Thomas Jefferson's Use of the Past," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XV (1958), 60.

⁴ Gilbert Chinard, "Introduction" in *The Commonplace Book of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U. P., 1926), 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 754, 212.

⁶ ALS, Thomas Jefferson to Bishop James Madison, January 31, 1800. The original is in the private collection of St. George Tucker Grinnan; a typescript in the Thomas Jefferson Papers at the University of Virginia Library.

⁷ [Emily] Millicent Sowerby, comp., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* (5 vols., Washington, D. C.: The Library of Congress, 1952-1959), vol. I, p. 505 f.

⁸ ALS, Thomas Jefferson to Herbert Croft, October 30, 1798. Thomas Jefferson Papers, University of Virginia Library.

⁹ ALS, John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 14, 1813 (folio 85524-35525) and ALS, Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 24, 1814 (folio 35638-35640), Library of Congress. It is apparent from these letters that neither correspondent realized the author to whom they referred as "J. W. Goethens Schristen [sic]" was actually Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Adams and Jefferson seem to have been introduced to "Goethens Schristen" by Friedrich Adrien Van der Kemp, who shared his interest in "Goethen's ingenious conjecture that not one word of what we call the Decalogue was written in the two tablets" (ALS, Friedrich Adrien Van der Kemp to Thomas Jefferson, June 14, 1816 [folio 36910-36911], Library of Congress).

¹⁰ ALS, Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816 (folio 36796-36797). Library of Congress.

¹¹ With the exception of Jefferson's account book, the several primary sources containing his firsthand and secondhand impressions of Germany along the Rhine are most readily available in Julian P. Boyd and Mina R. Bryan, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, XIII: March to 7 October 1788 (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1956).

¹² ALS, William MacClure to Thomas Jefferson, November 20, 1801 (folio 20318-20319). Library of Congress.

¹³ ALS, Thomas Jefferson to John Langdon, March 5, 1810 (folio 33719-33720). Library of Congress.

¹⁴ ALS, Thomas Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, September 29, 1811 (folio 34465). Library of Congress.

¹⁵ The readiest single source containing the bulk of this correspondence and a study of the relationship between Ticknor and Jefferson is One William Long, *Literary Pioneers. Early American Explorers of European Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P., 1934), 6-55.

¹⁶ AD, Thomas Jefferson, drafts of the Report of the Rockfish Gap Commission, August 1-4, 1818. Thomas Jefferson Papers, University of Virginia Library.