

RICHARD COBDEN'S ASSOCIATIONS WITH GERMANY ¹

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WHEN, in August, 1838, Richard Cobden set out on a tour in Germany, he was, at the age of 34, an already widely travelled man. He had made short visits to France, Switzerland, and the United States, and he had spent several months in the Near East. Lord Morley, in his *Life of Richard Cobden*, emphasises the abundance and copiousness of journals and letters registering impressions and experiences gained abroad.² Their great value lies in a combination of a thorough understanding of economic developments with a clear, straightforward style. It was precisely with the object of studying manufacturing and trading conditions that Cobden went to Germany.³ He was always ready to note abroad forms of communal life and educational progress which merited serious consideration by his countrymen. That such an attitude naturally leads to stressing the positive and creditable aspects of foreign characteristics, however honest and unbiassed the observer may be, is clearly shown by Cobden's remarks on men and manners in Prussia and Saxony.

In a letter to his brother Frederick, Richard Cobden points out how the Zollverein ("Commercial League") is gradually unifying Germany under Prussian leadership. The members of the Prussian civil service are to a great extent university trained. The extremely simple Court life of King Frederick William III sets an example to the country. The highest praise is reserved for the efficiency of the Prussian administration. "I very much suspect that at present, for the great mass of the people, Prussia possesses the best government in Europe."⁴

¹ I feel much indebted to the Librarian of the John Rylands Library, Professor Edward Robertson, for permitting me to use the MS. printed below and for his kind interest in the subject.

² John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, Jubilee edition, Vol. I (1896), p. 44.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴ 11th September, 1838. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

As Morley said in comment upon these lines, "It is not right to press the phrases of a hasty letter of a traveller too closely".¹ The same warning applies to the summary Cobden gave of his impressions on 29th September, 1838, when he had reached Salzburg by way of Leipzig, Prague, and Vienna. This letter, written to his business friend William Neild,² which is printed below, now forms part of John Rylands Library English MS. 868.

The letter is interesting for several reasons. Least of all perhaps for the favourable picture drawn of people and governments in Germany. In the light of later developments Cobden's lines may indeed appear to be a remarkable piece of exuberant optimism. But similar views were held by many foreign—especially French—observers who wrote on Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century. They do not, however, as a rule devote so much space to economic conditions. What Cobden said about Saxon industry was amply confirmed by its succeeding expansion. Cobden had emphasised the progress of Saxon industry already in 1836, when in his pamphlet *Russia* he spoke of the superiority in cheapness and quality of Saxon mixed cotton and linen drills.³

Cobden's description is characteristic of his own opinions, interests, and hopes. The observations on the disarmament of fortresses indicate his deep-rooted aversion to war—which in his case was based even more on practical than on moral considerations, and which was a corollary to his Free-trade convictions. He does not overlook, however, the part played by universal military service in raising the level of education.

One would like to know Cobden's impressions of Bavaria and Western Germany. Morley gives no details of this last part of the

¹ John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, Jubilee edition, Vol. I (1896), p. 131.

² William Neild, 1789-1864, a Quaker, was a partner in the firm of Thomas Hoyle & Sons, calico printers; he was elected Mayor of Manchester in 1840. Cf. William E. A. Axon, *The Annals of Manchester* (London, 1886), p. 292; and Shena D. Simon, *A Century of City Government, Manchester 1838-1938* (London, 1938), *passim*.

³ *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden*, ed. by Sir Louis Mallet and W. C. Bryant, Vol. I (1903), pp. 219, 226 ff. Edward Baines, Jr., writing at about the same time, still thought the Saxon cotton industry to be "as yet insignificant". *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (London, 1835), p. 526.

journey.¹ Cobden again came to Germany in July, 1847, at the end of eleven months spent in France, Spain, and Italy; at Vienna he had a long interview with Metternich, where the Prince did all the talking, which centred mainly on Italy.² At the end of the same month he reached Berlin, where he was invited to dinner at Potsdam by King Frederick William IV, and to tea by Prince William of Prussia.³ On his way north Cobden had had the pleasant surprise of seeing, at Dresden, in a shop window a silk handkerchief for sale, with his portrait and his name on it.⁴

During his long journey Richard Cobden had to attend innumerable dinners arranged by local Free-trade associations in his honour. The same obligation awaited him at Berlin; as usual Cobden made his speech in English, but apparently the greater part of his audience understood him, and there followed a translation.⁵ A few days afterwards the *Allgemeine Preussische Zeitung* published a long biographical note, ending with the impression Cobden made at that time, at the age of 43, on the writer of the article.⁶

“The mighty orator is of a slender, weakly, slightly nervous constitution; his features are delicate, his physiognomy bears the stamp of thoughtfulness and calmness, with a shade of resolution; there is nothing domineering, and his physiognomy is agreeable rather than impressive. It has often seemed surprising that a man of a seemingly weakly constitution could venture to undertake such tremendous exertions of mind and body. . . . The secret of his physical strength lies in his unusual temperance and in his happy ability to sleep whenever he wants to. The secret of his

¹ From Salzburg Cobden went on to Munich, where he arrived on 3rd October. *Muenchener Politische Zeitung*, 1838, no. 237.

² Cobden's diary of 10th July. Morley, Vol. I, pp. 442-43.

³ Later Emperor William I. Diary of 28th and 31st July. Morley, Vol. I, pp. 444-48.

⁴ Morley, Vol. I, p. 444. From Berlin Cobden went to St. Petersburg by Stettin-Danzig-Riga. On his homeward journey he passed Lübeck and Hamburg. In addition to the extracts from his diaries published by Morley in Vol. I, Ch. xviii, cf. also Julie Salis Schwabe, *Richard Cobden. Notes sur ses voyages, correspondances et souvenirs* (Paris, 1879), nos. xvii and xviii. English translation: *Reminiscences of Richard Cobden* (London, 1895).

⁵ Diary of 31st July. Morley, Vol. I, pp. 447-48. *Allgemeine Preussische Zeitung*, 1847, no. 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, nos. 215 and 216 (5th and 6th August).

moral strength, however, is to be found not only in the superiority of his mind and in the unbending firmness of his character, but also in the modesty and in the simplicity of his manners."

Throughout his political career Richard Cobden remained an ardent opponent of armed intervention; this attitude, to which he kept so steadfastly later during the Crimean war, brought him into early contact with the Peace Society. He took part in the Second General Peace Congress held at Paris in August, 1849,¹ and again in the Third Congress, held at Frankfurt in 1850. The Frankfurt meeting lasted from 22nd to 24th August, and took place in the Paulskirche, where the German Parliament of 1848 had assembled.² Not less than 250 of the 600 participants were British; there were also many Americans but relatively few Germans—owing largely to the war which was still going on in Schleswig-Holstein. The German press regarded the meeting in general with friendly interest, though with some scepticism; the debates were reported at great length. A Frankfurt newspaper noted that in the opening session both Richard Cobden and Higaga Bu, chief of the Chippewa Indians, were greeted with tremendous cheers.³

From the outset Richard Cobden took a prominent part in the proceedings. He was elected one of the vice-presidents of the assembly, and he headed a committee which sent an address of thanks to the French, Belgian, and Prussian governments for granting extra trains and dispensing with passport and customs formalities.⁴ During the sittings of the general assembly Cobden spoke several times. In his first speech he noted with some surprise the presence of General von Haynau.⁵ He appealed to

¹ Cf. Morley, Vol. II, pp. 45-49. The First Congress had been held at Brussels, September, 1848. There had been a Peace Meeting in London already in 1843. *Frankfurter Oberpostamts-Zeitung*, 1850, no. 201. The Fourth Congress was held in London, July, 1851.

² Cf. Morley, Vol. II, pp. 82-83, and the newspapers quoted in the notes below.

³ *Frankfurter Oberpostamts-Zeitung*, 1850, no. 200. Cf. also *Mainzer Journal*, 1850, no. 197, and *Heidelberger Journal*, 1850, no. 201.

⁴ *Rhein-Zeitung*, Baden-Baden, 1850, no. 168.

⁵ Haynau's severity in quelling the insurgent Hungarians had aroused strong feeling. From Frankfurt Haynau went straight to London, to be mobbed there by the brewers. *Mannheimer Journal*, 1850, no. 203.

the diplomats of the world to submit questions they could not settle among themselves to international arbitration rather than try to solve them by armed force. He urged the audience to bring their influence to bear on their governments and to convince public opinion. He concluded his speech with a wish for a united Europe.¹ At the end of the Congress Cobden expressed his wishes for Germany's spiritual greatness, material prosperity, and political freedom, amid endless hurraing, and waving of hats and handkerchiefs.²

On his return to England Cobden received friendly comment on his Frankfurt speeches from one of his acquaintances, Josias von Bunsen (Chevalier de Bunsen), Prussian Minister at the Court of St. James since 1841, who was married to an Englishwoman.³ They kept in touch after Bunsen had moved, in 1854, to Charlottenberg, his new residence outside Heidelberg.⁴ Through Bunsen Cobden heard of the Bender Institute, a well-known private school at Weinheim near Heidelberg, where he sent his only son Richard.⁵ Thus he kept true to the advice he had given in 1838 to Mr. Neild, to make his boys learn German.

It fell to Bunsen to inform Richard Cobden of the sudden death (from scarlet fever) of his son in April, 1856.⁶ Only a few

¹ The speech is printed in full by J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, no. xxviii. Cf. also (Henry Richard), *Proceedings of the Third General Peace Congress* (London, 1851).

² *Frankfurter Oberpostamts-Zeitung*, 1850, no. 202. *Mainzer Journal*, 1850, no. 200. After the Frankfurt meeting, a great number of Americans and Englishmen, among them the well-known Quaker Joseph Sturge, made an excursion to Heidelberg. On this occasion Heidelberg University conferred a doctor's degree on James Pennington, a negro from the United States, who had studied theology at New Haven, Conn.; it was the first time a doctor's degree was awarded to a negro by any European university. *Frankfurter Oberpostamts-Zeitung*, 1850, no. 204 (27th August). For J. Pennington cf. *Dict. of American Biography*, xiii, 441.

³ Letter from R. Cobden to J. von Bunsen, 3rd October, 1850. J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, no. xxix. For Frances baroness von Bunsen, cf. *Dict. of National Biography* (O.U.P. edition), iii, 272.

⁴ "Many distinguished strangers, especially Englishmen", frequented his house. Cf. G. Weber, *Heidelberger Erinnerungen* (Stuttgart, 1886), p. 279.

⁵ Cf. Frances von Bunsen, *Christian Carl Josias Freiherr von Bunsen*; deutsche Ausgabe v. Friedr. Nippold, iii (1871), p. 455. The original, shorter version, *A Memoir of Baron Bunsen* (2 vols.), appeared in 1868.

⁶ Richard died at Weinheim on 6th April, at the age of 14. Weinheim Church Register, Deaths, 1850-84, p. 86. Cf. Morley, Vol. II, pp. 180 ff.

days before his death the boy had written a long letter to his parents, telling them of excursions to places in the neighbourhood and asking for some valentines to give to his friends.¹

Cobden naturally took a lively interest in Bunsen's projects for international arbitration and disarmament. He did not fail to perceive Bunsen's tendency to undertake too much at a time and to lose himself in details.² The two friends saw each other again at Paris in November, 1859, when Cobden was negotiating a commercial treaty with the French government.³ They met for a last time at Cannes in February, 1860, the year of Bunsen's death.⁴

Another personal link with Heidelberg was Mrs. Julie Salis Schwabe, the German born wife of a Manchester manufacturer.⁵ Mrs. Schwabe, who spent much time at Heidelberg and enjoyed Bunsen's confidence, was also a friend of many years' standing of Cobden's family. The letters written to her by Richard Cobden were not confined to private matters, they often discussed questions of the day. But when Richard Cobden, during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis of 1864, wrote to her of his friendly feelings towards Germany,⁶ his opposition to the war party was hardly founded on mere sentiment, but rather on his condemnation of Palmerstonian meddlesomeness, and on his dislike of defending a treaty made without the least regard for the people concerned. At the root of all his exaggerated laudatory expressions about other nations—and they referred to the United States as much as to Germany—lay probably the wish to make his countrymen turn his observations to their own advantage and to spur them out of complacency.

¹ J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, no. lvii.

² Letter to Mrs. Schwabe, 21st June, 1856, and to Bunsen, 27th September, 1856; J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, nos. lxi, lxii. Letter from Bunsen to Cobden, 4th July, 1856; Bunsen-Nippold (cf. p. 463, n. 5), iii, p. 458.

³ Bunsen-Nippold, iii, p. 554. Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 563.

⁴ J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, no. lxvi.

⁵ When the Anti-Cornlaw League was reconstituted in 1852, Salis Schwabe & Co., Manchester, subscribed £500. Cf. Henry Ashworth, *Recollections of Richard Cobden, M.P.* (1876), p. 239.

⁶ J. Salis Schwabe, *op. cit.*, no. lxxi. Cf. Morley, Vol. II, pp. 440 ff.

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APPENDIX

A LETTER FROM RICHARD COBDEN TO WILLIAM NEILD ¹

(John Rylands Library English MS. 868/3)

Saltzburgh, 30 September, 1838.

My dear Sir,

Having turned my face homewards at Vienna (which place I reached after a rapid journey by way of Berlin, Dresden, Leipsic, etc.) I take advantage of the first delay of a few hours here, on my way to the Rhine, to redeem the promise I made, by sending you a letter. So exceedingly limited has been my time, that I have scarcely seen more than the *Capitals* of Prussia, Austria, and Saxony, and these superficially only. But I do not regret the labor of the journey since it has enabled me to form a more correct opinion of the present state and prospects of Central Europe than I could possibly have gained from books. There are two different plans of travelling to advantage. The first and best is to take time enough in each country to ascertain thoroughly its condition from personal observation ; the other is to ascertain from actual inspection just so much as will enable one to read with advantage the more detailed accounts of others. I am obliged to content myself with the second mode, for want of time to pursue the first. My plan is to get the outlines of the principal features, and, like the painters, leave other hands to fill up the details for me.

One of the most striking points in the policy of the Continental states—because one that affects most agreeably the stranger—is the great attention every where bestowed upon the roads. In Prussia they are scarcely inferior to our own turnpikes. Saxony is not behind Prussia. And Austria, although inferior to her neighbors in the north, is making great efforts in the same way. In fact, since I landed on the Continent, I have not travelled on an *unmacadamised* road. Heaps of small stones, cut to a prescribed form and size,—men busily engaged in scraping the roads,—organised bodies of workmen employed in digging and levelling,—meet the eye in every direction throughout Germany. Nor are they altogether idle in the formation of rail-roads. There are three lines begun at Vienna ; one of which is in partial operation ; and I saw the trains arrive and depart, filled with passengers. A very important line is nearly finished from Dresden to Leipsic ; and another from the latter place to Magdebourg, the head of the Elbe navigation, is in equal forwardness. When these roads are opened next year there will be a steam communication from the Centre of Europe to the Sea. Another line from Berlin to Dresden is also in progress. I envy the travellers of the next generation, who will travel over *Europe* with as little expense of time and labor as it cost our fathers to make the tour of England !! It is impossible to foresee all the effects of this revolution in the communication between nations ; but we in England ought to be prepared for meeting the great stimulus which it will afford to the people of the Continent in manufactures and commerce. Rail-roads will, in fact, put nations much more upon a level of equality than hitherto. Common roads may be of very different qualities,

¹ The original spelling of the letter has been retained.

although nominally the same—; thus, the turnpike of England is vastly superior to the *chaussée* of France, but rail-roads, when once constructed, will carry equally fast the passengers and merchandise of all countries.

But the most important feature in the institutions of Germany is the great attention bestowed upon the education of the people. Prussia is very much in advance of all European nations in this respect. There is scarcely a young man or woman in the country from 20 to 30 who cannot read or write, and understand accounts. Even the militia service, which every young man must enter for a time, is made subservient to mental culture. If a young peasant cannot read or write on entering the army he is put to school; and it is the remark in the villages of that country, that a young fellow entering the militia an uncultivated boor returns to his farm an educated man. We are apt in England to suspect that this education is made subservient to despotic views, on the part of the government. Nothing can be more irrational and unphilosophical on our part than such a supposition. Enlightenment and despotism are never found long in one community. Prussia is in fact no longer under an absolute monarch. The King,¹ who is one of the best of men, has voluntarily broken the sceptre of absolutism in his own hand, by raising up an enlightened public opinion to control the policy of his government. The public concerns of Prussia are managed with economy, wisdom, and justice. Simplicity and frugality are the fashion at Berlin. The Court dines at 2. The King rides out in a plain carriage and pair, dressed in a foraging cap, and unattended by military. The theatres commence at 6, and close at 9 or 9½; and Berlin is as quiet as an English village at 11. The same moderate habits prevail in Vienna, and Dresden, as well as other parts of Germany.

The system of education in Saxony is equal to that of Prussia. By the Austrian government considerable efforts are making in the same way. In fact the very best infant-school I ever saw is in Prague, the capital of Bohemia. When I relate to you, from the notes I took, the particulars of this establishment, you will agree with me that it is the model of such schools. That there must be great simplicity and moderation in the mind of the people of Germany will be self-evident from the character of their governments,—for nations and their rulers are ever similar in their characteristics. The Germans appear to me to answer to the quality described by English farmers when they speak of a “*kindly*” breed of stock. They are innately and naturally good-natured. I should think an act of rudeness never takes place in the whole of Germany. A churlish, uncivil, or splenetic German would be a curiosity. In going into their schools the children all rise and in one chorus give me “welcome”; and as I leave they all join in a hearty “adieu”. The workmen in the factories salute their employers by raising their caps on his first appearance amongst them in the morning; and even the bed-ridden invalids in the hospitals made an effort to raise their night-caps to me in walking through those establishments. All this is only the outcome and visible sign of an inward feeling of kindness and civility. Whether they would do well to dispose with these externals may be a matter of doubt. The *Vicar of Wakefield* used to make his children kiss and shake hands every morning at the breakfast table, because he said he was afraid if the forms of affection werè omitted the feeling itself might be forgotten; and the Germans seem to be of the same old-fashioned sentiment.

¹ Frederick William III.

Saxony, to a commercial man, is the most interesting portion of Germany. The people are perhaps the most industrious and frugal in the world. It is a little bee-hive—what Scotland is to England and New England to North America, Saxony is to Germany. The salt of the land is in Saxony. They are rivalling and indeed superseding us in many articles of manufacture; and if our present system of legislation upon the trade in provisions be persevered in, they will still further interfere with the labor of our artisans. To give you an idea of the extent of their manufactures, I need only mention that besides extensive productions in broad-cloths, merinoes, lace, silks and gingham, they make annually two millions and a half of dozen pairs of stockings. I shall have some facts of this kind which I must bring before the attention of the Manchester Community on my return, shewing the operation of our corn-laws.

A great treat awaits you and Mrs. Neild when you put yourselves and your children into a strong "travelling" carriage, and pay a visit to Germany. Be assured it may be done with as much comfort and far less expense, than a trip of the same time to the hills of Derbyshire. But before you set off your sons must have mastered so much of the German language as to be able to be your interpreters. It is a language that is destined to become infinitely more important in their after-life than even now. Though at present it is spoken at the Courts of five kingdoms, and an empire—to say nothing of a score of minor potentates—altogether controlling upwards of sixty millions of people! The education and habits of the German family are now producing seeds which only require time to yield still richer fruits of literature and learning. Every year six or seven thousand new publications issue from the presses of Germany. Hundreds of thousands of volumes are printed annually in Leipsic alone. The Universities are filled with students, and directed by the most eminent men in Europe. Every thing in fact is tending to give to the literature of Germany a great influence on the future mind of Europe. Your boys must therefore learn German.

I must not omit to notice one very gratifying fact which is not generally known I think in England. A great many of the large towns, through which I passed, have thrown down their fortifications, and turned them into peaceful promenades. This is the case with Hamburgh, Leipsic, etc. In the public garden of the latter place is a monument to the Burgomaster who first proposed this change.¹ During the last Continental war it was found that those towns which were fortified suffered the most severely, as they invited the enemy; and what proved often quite as disastrous, as in the case of the Hanse towns, they afforded asylums for their friends.² This in the peace led to the destruction of the fortifications; and the largest and richest cities on the Continent are now entirely unprotected against the attacks of an army. Here is a practical illustration on a grand scale of the truth of the great Christian principle which distinguishes your religious body in *thus throwing aside the weapon of defense as a means of security!* There is another aspect in which it may be viewed with satisfaction by the friend of humanity. These rich towns containing the wealth and influence of the several communities will be pledged by their interest against a war. However we have a guarantee for peace in the financial embarrassments of every government of

¹ Karl Wilhelm Müller, burgomaster of Leipsic, 1778-1801. Cf. Karl Grosse, *Geschichte der Stadt Leipzig*, ii (Leipzig, 1842), pp. 432 f.

² An allusion to Blücher's defence of Lübeck during the Franco-Prussian war of 1806.

Europe. There is not one of the Northern powers that could raise a million sterling to put an army in motion ; England and France are not in a better position ;—for this I thank Heaven, believing as I do that if the treasuries were filled the governments would be at war again to empty them.

I have not left myself room to say a word about your local politics. It is a month since I saw an English paper, and I know not what is doing at home. I have no doubt that during your absence friend Wilson ¹ (to whom I beg to be remembered) has done what is right in the way of organisation for the election. I hope the town is interested in the matter. Any thing like apathy would now be fateful to the prosperity of the good cause. I hope to be in Manchester to take upon me a share of the labors in about three weeks. In the mean time—requesting you to give my regards to Mrs. Neild and your family—and to your partners—I beg to subscribe myself

Yours very faithfully

RICHARD COBDEN.

When at Prague a Mr. Meisner who once spent a day with you (introduced by Mr. Pattison or Mr. Stillingford) spoke in strong terms of the kindness you and yours showed him and begged me to remember him to you.²

Wm. Neild Esqre
Messrs. J. Hoyle & Sons
Manchester
England

¹ Probably George Wilson (1808-1870), who was secretary to the committee which obtained the charter of incorporation for Manchester in 1839. He was elected chairman of the Anti-Cornlaw League in 1841. *Dict. of Nat. Biogr.* (O.U.P. edition), xxi, pp. 565 f.

² William Patti(n)son was a business friend of William Neild. Two letters he wrote to W. Neild in 1835 and 1836 form now part of John Rylands Library English MS. 838. I regret that I have been unable to identify "Mr. Meisner" and "Mr. Stillingford". The former's name is a very common one in Germany.