

John R. Davis, *The Victorians and Germany*, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2007. 419 pp. US-\$ 80.95, €55.90 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-03911-065-0.

The Victorians' discovery of Germany, or:
Britain's special relationship in the nineteenth century

It is quite easy to make out Britain's partner in a special relationship in the twentieth century. Commonalities in political goals in international relations, in language, religion, cultural elements seem to make the U.S. the predestined nation for this role. However, for the nineteenth century the question which nation was special to Britain seems much more difficult to answer. It was not France, admired for its cultural refinement and *savoir vivre*, nor Italy, praised for its aesthetic and landscape beauties, nor Britain's source of world power, the Empire, that ideally fitted this position. In fact, the Victorian period saw the emergence of a special relationship that many, looking back after 1918 or 1945, strove hard to deny: the one between Britain and Germany. No other part of the world interested the Victorians more than Germany, so Davis's provoking introductory statement. With no other country, so his main argument running through each chapter of this elucidating book, interest turned into such a deep and long lasting influence.

Despite the bulk of literature on Victorian Britain, this influence is still underrated. Only too rarely has the – in this case particularly fruitful – interdisciplinary approach been applied, an approach which would let the already existing findings in diverse disciplines work on one another and inspire new research questions and answers. To state it clearly right at the beginning: Davis's book is not the multidisciplinary research study, interpreting new source material, shifting from one disciplinary approach to the next, applying it in depth and in this way exploring all the many layers of the subject matter at hand. This, anyhow, would produce a multi-volume analysis. Rather, it offers a relatively short, astonishingly comprehensive and highly readable overview, a summary of the research done in various fields of Anglo-German interactions in the nineteenth century, i.e. in literature, religion, historiography, art and music, education, travel and politics. However, the book provides more than a clever retelling of the story,

since the summary is combined with an exploration of the questions, interests, findings that connect these various layers.

To a certain degree, the chapters unfold in a chronological order, mirroring the way that interest spilled over from one field into another. Parallel to kindling a new flame elsewhere, interest often remained fairly steady in some fields throughout the period. Discussions commonly took place in various fields simultaneously, interlinking them through recurring arguments and ideas. The discourses on German literature and theology are a case in point. It all began in the early nineteenth century, when several initiatives coincided in the attempt to establish Germany – then still more of a construct than a nation-state –, as the land of ideas, Mme de Staël's, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's, Henry Crabb Robinson's and others. Many hymns were translated from the German, Gothic literature discovered Germany as a colorful scenery in which to situate its dramatic plots, British travellers made the Rhine a place of sojourn rather than part of the route to other countries. But what actually kept the spark of interest alive and transformed it into a bright and steady flame of eulogy, criticism and rejection was the impulse of modernization at work in the Victorian middle classes and the society it brought forth. Changeable like the interest it produced throughout the whole Victorian era, it made Britons of that age open their eyes to developments on the continent, self-content at first, with worries about the preservation of British power later in the century.

Understanding Germany was closely linked to the perception of Britain. It was the perceived limitations and restrictions of Victorian life that induced British intellectuals to look elsewhere for intellectual freedom, to be more precise to a – construct of – Germany that became increasingly associated with cultural superiority. Taking up the torch from romanticism and Gothic literature, the early Victorian age saw German “Geist”, realism and worldliness become intriguing features in light of dogmatic utilitarianism and philistinism. Among the many advocates of German culture, Thomas Carlyle was the most influential single individual in the attempt to familiarize Victorians with German literature and thought in the nineteenth century. To those in need of solace amidst an overwhelmingly racy progress of industrialization, the construct of a mystic Germany – now interpreted as an asset – seemed all too alluring. Even a character like the supposedly typical German professor (of philosophy), Diogenes Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, appeared lovably eccentric and

agreeably inefficient. In mid-century praise for philosophy and the imaginative power of a people that had produced Goethe's *Faust* and Grimm's fairy tales was supplemented by a new focus on the achievements of German science. Instead of excluding one another, idealism and realism were perceived as essential characteristics, two sides of the same coin that made up German culture. In sum, the increasing interest in German writing followed out of a dealing with domestic developments. It funneled information, knowledge, concepts and cultural traditions into the debate in Britain which in its turn transformed them into part of the British literary heritage.

Paving the way for a German model did not necessarily lead to its wholesale acceptance in Britain. In more than one area, social reform is a telling example, strong resistance to learning from developments and practices in Germany either persisted from previous eras or built up the more 'German' rationalism or efficiency were presented as ideals. This was as much a feature of the Anglo-German special relationship as the duality of an inferiority complex in Britain and a supposed German superiority as the land of learning. Edwin Chadwick, whose reform initiatives were clearly modeled after pioneer initiatives in Germany could not always count on an appreciation of what contemporaries called his 'Prussian tendencies', since 'Prussian' meant foreign and un-British to opponents of the workhouse system introduced by Chadwick. In contrast, with others the very same epithet resulted in a view of German society as liberal and progressive instead of authoritarian and backwards. In fact, throughout the period a plurality of German models – as well as their complementary opposites – were manufactured, created to dovetail each liking and each interpretation of what Victorian meant at a given moment.

This, in a nutshell, may be seen as the key to the continued Victorian interest in Germany. Once the country had been established as a potential model in many fields, it served well as the background to debates on deficits and problems perceived in Britain. Hence, perception of things German were much more image than reality. A second feature of this special relationship was the overlapping of personnel and intellectual content. Germany was indeed debated by the most influential sections of society, but the group of debaters was not that large. In addition, this a third feature, some individuals played disproportionately important roles as facilitators of the discussion. They often moved in personal networks and stimulated each other's thinking on the subject. In so

doing they increased and perpetuated the debate and kept Germany, whose potentials and risks were continually weighed and controversially assessed right up to the Great War, in the forefront of Victorian attention. There is no way denying that, to name a fourth feature of this relationship, all this led to an interest in Germany which was deep and important to the Victorians. It reverberated throughout British society and left a discernible, if not indelible stamp on the Victorian's journey into modernity. If any doubt as to the special character of these Anglo-German interactions remains, a reading of John Davis's illustrative depiction will dispel them.

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