

**AMERICAN TRAITS,
FROM THE POINT OF
VIEW OF A GERMAN**

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American traits, from the point of view of a German by Hugo Münsterberg

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HUGO MÜNSTERBERG

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OF A GERMAN

BY

HUGO MÜNSTERBERG



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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1903

To
FREDERICK WILLIAM HOLLS
Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague
IDEAL TYPE OF THE
AMERICAN OF GERMAN DESCENT



PREFACE

THE following essays are not scholarly studies, but light sketches drawn in leisure hours by a German who has pitched his tent among the Americans and become interested in the differences between the Americans and the Germans. But my interest in that contrast is not merely a theoretical one: I believe that these two nations can and ought to learn from each other, and that in this case even the protectionists of national civilization ought not to favor a prohibitive tariff on foreign ideals. Such mutual instruction has been hindered by prejudices and misunderstandings: the two nations do not know each other sufficiently, although they are connected by innumerable ties from the past and will need each other's good will still more in the years to come. To root out such prejudices and to facilitate mutual benefit, it becomes a duty to measure critically the culture of the one country by the ideals of the other.

In this small volume the topic is discussed only from one side, for this book is written for Americans, and for Americans only. The problem is, therefore, not what Germany ought to learn from the United States, but rather, how far a fuller understanding of German ideals can be serviceable to American culture. Of course this point of view has limited from the beginning the circle of problems to demand consideration; thus it has not been necessary to speak of commerce and industry and a hundred other topics with regard to which Germans and Americans might be compared. And the choice of subjects has been further influenced by factors in the life of the author. Schoolboy, student, and later university professor in Germany, and now for seven years a professor in America, I have been of course more closely in contact with certain sides of civilization than with others; it is thus natural that the problems of education and scholarship take somewhat the central place in my discussions. Even the special seat of observation must have had its influence on my impressions: I was hardly surprised to read the other day that I see the American world

through German eyes with Harvard astigmatism.

That I see it with German eyes is certainly true: it is the only reason which gives, perhaps, to these small sketches a right to exist; if I saw America with the eyes of an American I should hardly hope to notice features which possibly my neighbors overlook. It is the contrast which brings out the lines, and that fact alone excuses my speaking to Americans on American subjects after so short a period of acquaintance; had I waited longer I should have seen my surroundings more nearly with American eyes and should have perceived less the characteristic differences. I think I can say at least that I have made the best use of these years of American life to come in contact with its infinite variety. While the Harvard life in Boston offers in itself a good opportunity to meet men and to feel the pulse of American civilization, I have traveled again and again over the country and have tried to experience the national life in all its important or characteristic phases.

These informal pages, of course, cannot show

wholly what American life has meant to me, inasmuch as my topic forces me to the side of the opposition. If it is my aim to point to those features of American life on which a comment in the light of European ideals seems allowable, the picture which I draw must appear one-sided, as the task gives me no chance to linger on the superiorities of American culture which do not need the retouching by foreign ideals. I am thus obliged to put in all the shadows and to brush out the lights; therefore no one ought to imagine that it has been my intention to draw a complete picture of American life as it appears to me.

This preponderance of adverse criticism brings an unavoidable result: I must express opinions which are antagonistic to widely favored opinions of the day, to pet theories, and to flourishing customs. I have already experienced the consequences. All the five essays have appeared previously, the first three in the "Atlantic Monthly," the last two in the "International Monthly," — I reprint them with the kind permission of the magazines, — and their isolated appearance has every time given rise to a public discussion of