

**THE GERMAN MIND AS REFLECTED IN  
THEIR LITERATURE FROM 1870 TO 1914:  
TOGETHER WITH  
TWO SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTERS ON  
NEW MOVEMENTS WHICH HAVE ARISEN  
BETWEEN 1914 AND 1921**

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The German mind as reflected in their literature from 1870 to 1914: together with two supplementary chapters on new movements which have arisen between 1914 and 1921 by Fanny Johnson

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**FANNY JOHNSON**

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THE GERMAN MIND



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## INTRODUCTION

THE need of seeing ourselves as others see us is applicable to literature as to other departments of life. But the converse principle, namely, to see others as they see themselves, is equally incumbent. This is indeed to love our neighbour as ourself, since *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. We can hardly hope, for some time to come, that either English or German should accept as approximately veracious the mental picture that each of us has formed of the other. It is perhaps more fruitful, and at least less embittering to examine with care each other's respective self-portraiture. A self-portrait, even if flattering, is drawn with concentrated interest in the subject, and qualities will be discovered by the painter that are rarely revealed to the eye of a stranger. Autobiography, or self-portrayal in writing, has this additional value, that the character is oftentimes unconsciously revealed. A man may pride himself on some action or sentiment which to the reader of his life appears mean or base, and again, he may, like Pepys, betray in his blithe relation of some petty incident a standard beneath the highest level, and which, coldly considered, is unworthy of the best in himself. It is rarer when the hero recounts deeds of note as though they were matters of course. But in all these instances the real self is more apparent to the attentive reader than to the writer. It is of such self-portraiture, not of an individual, but of a nation, that I intend to treat.

Through the mouth of many witnesses, speaking, as it were, all on the side of the defence, I shall endeavour to set forth the truth about Germans, as it appears to themselves. Humility is, perhaps, not their strong point, and we may find, as we should expect, plenty of self-laudation. But a man who is honourably and truly proud of his race or his class,



is all the more regretful for what he deems a blot on his scutcheon. And so we shall find, even in Germany, prophets of the type of Jeremiah, who warn their people against sin. And again, we shall value most those indirect evidences of a standard, or point of view, which emerge from the naïve and fictitious narrations that are truer than history.

The period treated of is that of the two generations between 1870 and 1914, the forty years which, in our current view, included vast preparations for the culminating horror of the later war. The problems of how far the average German was aware of this preparatory condition, or whether indeed it had existence save in the suspicious brain of Germany's enemies, are here beside the mark. We can only infer from their literature to what extent militarism had taken possession of their thought. For our part, it is certain that during the first part of this period admiration among us of German thoroughness, of German education, and of German music and musicians was an almost universal sentiment. Carlyle, the prophet of the Prussian Frederick, was still alive; Matthew Arnold was constantly holding up his countrymen to the derision of Arminius the German, Charles Hallé was conducting concerts at Manchester, Sir George Grove was explaining Schubert, and Clara Schumann interpreting her husband's piano pieces to innumerable London audiences. Thousands of English girls were the petted inmates of German homes, either as companions, pensionaires, or governesses, finding, in the latter capacity, an appreciation of learning, and a kind treatment that was rarely at that epoch the lot of the English governess, and returning to their native land full of *Schwärmerei* about Germany. And German had supplanted Italian as an accomplishment in girls' schools.

All this perhaps might be put down to the credit of England, rather than of Germany. We disliked not, because we neither feared nor suspected. It is not my province to discuss how or why a change came over the spirit of this dream. The change *did* come, and the how and why have been discussed *ad nauseam*. My concern is only with the extent to which the new spirit was reflected in German literature, and with the counteracting forces that have been at

work which may bring about a yet further and happier change.

During the recent bitter experiences, only a very few persons in either nation have kept their heads, and on both sides there has been talk of repudiation of further mutual dealings. It is part of my aim to shew the folly, as well as the evil of such repudiations, if, after a little, sentiments have not already simmered down. In the one matter of acquaintance with the German language, it must be evident to all intelligent persons that this will be hereafter an absolute essential, even putting it that our own aim will be the outwitting of a wily foe. True, some few education authorities were ill-advised enough to suggest the abrogating of German teaching in schools, but others happily saw that this would rather be a policy of cutting off the nose to spite the face. To compete in commerce, we must be at least as well equipped as our adversary, and how are we to know what he would be at, if we have not enough of his language to catch him (say) at his tricks? It is disgraceful too for our diplomats not to be able, as I believe is the case, to carry on even small talk through the medium of the native language of Germany. And to come at once to broader and higher issues, may we not admit that a day will come, sooner, we hope, rather than later, when Germany ceases to be the enemy, and when some acquaintance with the German mind will be not only desirable but imperative? And acquaintance with the mind of a nation is only possible through its language and literature. When passions on both sides are calmer, we shall need to correct and inform our judgment.

But without trenching upon so much of debatable ground, let us at least admit the existence of such a thing as natural curiosity. At present, a dark curtain divides the true thought of Englishmen and Germans from one another. And though if this were lifted much might be revealed from which there would be a mutual shrinking, we may arrive at a partial, nay even a considerable degree of knowledge by a careful study of what was being thought *before* the war. What was *then* the German attitude towards ourselves as individuals? Was it the fact that they outstripped us in educational system and results, was their commerce better organised, were their poor

better cared for, what was their opinion about conscription and militarism? And many other things there are that appeal, apart from international rivalry or competition, to the common humanity of both countries. After a heated quarrel disputants, in the making up process, go back, with mutual effort at comprehension, to the *status quo ante* of their thoughts, when each is willing to listen to what the other thinks he meant. In such a spirit I appeal to the reasonable in my own country. Here we have in black and white a mass of evidence to prove what was occupying the mind of our foe, what he was saying to himself and his friends in unguarded moments. We can examine these written documents coolly, since they were meant for home consumption, and they will serve our purpose better for the moment than a visit to the country. For in actual intercourse with foreigners, neither party is as it were off guard. The conversation of natives is directed to prove to the stranger that all is well with them. Besides few of us are so fortunately placed as to command introductions to the best elements among foreigners. Whereas we can select and exclude at our own will among their books.

Novels, plays and poems poured forth in ever-increasing streams from the German press at the rate of some half-dozen per day throughout the year. Time and eyesight would fail in the attempt to read one quarter of these, and accordingly I make no effort or pretence to be exhaustive in the sketches which follow. My design is precisely to direct readers to enter into German life through the doorway of the written word, and to act, having entered, as a polite host, introducing distinguished guests whose own genius is expected to shine rather than to do the bulk of the talking himself.

In science, it is coming to be thought more profitable to enquire diligently into a few specimens rather than to pile up statistics, and so, I take it, we shall return to the dictum that the best-read man is the reader of a few books. I call attention, then, to a comparatively small selection of writers and among these to a few typical works.

And again I note some of the books which appear to represent most fully different aspects of social, political, or religious movements and attitudes, whether or no such books