

**THE PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS OF
GERMANY: A DISCOURSE BEFORE THE
PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY OF BROWN
UNIVERSITY, AT PROVIDENCE, R. I.,
SEPTEMBER, 1, 1847. PP. 1-53**

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HENRY WHEATON

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THE
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A DISCOURSE

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BEFORE

THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

OF BROWN UNIVERSITY,

AT PROVIDENCE, R. I., SEPTEMBER, 1, 1847.

By HENRY WHEATON,

LATE MINISTER OF THE UNITED STATES AT THE COURT OF PRUSSIA.

BOSTON:

CHARLES C. LITTLE AND JAMES BROWN.

1847.

DISCOURSE.

CALLED upon, after so long an absence from my native city and my native land, to address you on this anniversary of our *alma mater*, the recurrence of which must revive so many interesting and touching recollections in all our minds, instead of dwelling on those recollections in which it would be delightful to indulge, or discussing any of the great social or political questions which agitate the present time, I propose to speak to you of the progress and prospects of that foreign country where I have passed so many years of my public life; which, peopled by a kindred race, has for us a peculiar and abiding interest; and to which mankind are indebted for two of the greatest promoters of their moral improvement. To Germany we owe that mechanical invention which lends wings to thought, and that great moral revolution which has purified Christianity from its grossest corruptions, and adapted it to promote the onward progress of humanity. The art of printing, as you all well know, was the principal instrument by

which was accomplished the reformation of religion, and the revival of classical learning in Europe. The German monk who invented gunpowder reduced the mailed knight to a level with his naked vassal; but Guttenberg, in finding out what seemed to be a mere mechanical instrument for multiplying the copies of manuscripts, in fact disclosed to the modern world the secret of the moral power of public opinion—a power almost unknown to the classic states of antiquity, or the communities of the fental ages. Guttenberg and Luther—two immortal names—sufficient to give lustre to any age or nation! Germany has done well to erect the statues of her two great men, (these heroes of civilization, these conquerors in the realms of thought,) the one at the confluence of two of her most beauteous streams, the Rhine and the Main,—the other, on the great square of Wittenberg, where the Saxon reformer burnt the bulls of Leo, and kindled that mighty flame which can never be extinguished. American liberty is the daughter of British liberty, and they are both the children of the Reformation. But neither the English nor the American revolution could have been accomplished without the aid of that magic art which the burgher of Mainz had unconsciously provided as the instrument of civil and religious freedom. Demosthenes, indeed, with his resistless eloquence

“Wielded at will that fierce democracy,
Shook the arsenal, and fulmin’d over Greece,
To Macedon and Artaxerxes’ throne.”

But had he been aided by the power of the press, the effects of his eloquence would not have been bounded by the narrow limits of Greece and the neighboring states. His voice would have been heard in the remotest regions of the earth. The cause of Athens would have become the cause of every people, civilized and barbarian, and the wisdom of her great statesman and orator might have united them all in one general confederacy against the all-grasping ambition of the crafty monarch who regarded the conquest of Greece only as the prelude to the conquest of the world.

The reformation of religion and the revival of letters mutually reacted upon each other, as cause and effect, and contributed to accelerate the improvement of the intellectual and moral nature of individual man, as well as the general happiness of society. Coinciding with the discovery of the American world by Columbus and Cabot, and its colonization by the Latin and Teutonic nations of Europe, the art of printing, the revival of letters, and the reformation of religion, combine with triple force, to mark an eventful epoch in the history of our race; since which, its progress, though not always regular and by equal steps, has been constant during the three centuries which have elapsed, and enables us, from the elevation on which we are now placed, to look forth upon the promised land, and to cheer our posterity in their onward march towards that perfection which ought ever to be kept in view, as the ultimate, though unattainable aim of humanity.

Every nation has contributed to this general progress

according to its own peculiar aptitudes, and the particular circumstances in which it has been placed. The present has its root in the past. To comprehend the peculiar genius and character of any people, we must trace the stream of its history back to its source. Striking, indeed, is the contrast between that Germany described eighteen hundred years ago, by the graphic pen of Tacitus—a cheerless scene, covered with the gloom of rugged forests, or deformed with wide-extended marshes, and thinly peopled by scattered tribes of barbarians, passing the intervals of war and of the chase, the image of war, in sluggish repose or riotous intemperance,—and the same land cultivated, civilized, filled with powerful states and flourishing cities, improved by commerce and industry, and adorned with the richest gifts of art, literature, and science. Germany successfully resisted the victorious arms of Rome, but was ultimately subdued by the powerful influence of her laws and institutions. The Roman missionaries bore the light of Christianity into those benighted regions, whilst the Roman jurists communicated the knowledge of that code which had been forcibly imposed on other nations as a badge of conquest; which was at first resisted by Germany as an intolerable yoke of servitude; but was ultimately adopted by her as one of the most powerful instruments of civilization. Many of those primitive traits of national character which the great Roman historian has traced with such a masterly hand, still remain indelibly impressed as the distinguishing marks of a separate race upon the

German physiognomy. But they have been essentially modified by culture and foreign influences, and the inquiry remains, by what process the present national character has been formed; by what peculiar means it has been gradually developed, and what results may be expected from its future advances.

It is the peculiar characteristic of German civilization, in every stage of its progress, that the intellectual has ever surpassed the social development; the culture of the mind has ever outstripped the social and political condition of the nation. Even the poetry of the Minnesingers was elevated far above the general tone of society during the middle age, in moral purity, in tenderness of sentiment, and delicacy of expression. Contrast the learning, the wit, and the polemic powers of Luther, Melancthon, and the other illustrious reformers and scholars, their cotemporaries — the deep interest excited by their writings among all the cultivated classes of society, with the want of refinement in their own manners and taste, as well as the same want throughout the nation. Compare the profound and diffusive studies of the German universities from the period of the reformation, the pure and elevated character of the writings of Leibnitz and other German philosophers of the seventeenth century, with those scandalous chronicles of the courts of Brandenburg and Saxony, which put to shame the most licentious works of the present day, and in which vice loses no part of its grossness by the refinements of polished manners and of pleasures embellished by art and lit-

erature such as then adorned the court and capital of Louis XIV., and it will be seen at once that the literary and scientific developments of the nation had operated with much less effect on the social condition than in France. Hence the peculiar character of the German authors has ever been the want of knowledge of the living and active world, the want of a feeling of reality. In reading their works, we are too often conscious how little influence the business and the concerns of practical life, public and private, have exercised over their minds, and that they have lived almost entirely secluded in the solitary world of their own ideas. "Even now," says a German critic with somewhat too much severity, "the greater part of our scholars and authors live like *Troglodytes*, in their book caves, and not having a view of external nature, lose at once the sense for it, and the faculty of enjoying it."

In other countries the author is an orator, who addresses the public, as it were from the tribune, in a language common to him and the other classes of the community; whilst in Germany he *was*, and still *is* often wanting in that practical good sense and tact which might enable him to command the attention of those who are engaged in the active business of life, and for whom mere abstractions have no charm. In all times past, the learned and active classes of the German nation have lived apart, in two separate worlds, detached from each other, and having little or no mutual sympathy or community of ideas and feelings. It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century