

**THE STORY OF
JOHN
FREDERIC OBERLIN**

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The story of John Frederic Oberlin by Augustus Field Beard

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PREFACE

THE story of JOHN FREDERIC OBERLIN, written in French, was published in Strasburg in 1831, five years after his death. The author, D. E. Stoeber, a lawyer, a friend of Oberlin, was in his youth a student under his instruction and for several years a member of his household. In the preparation of his biography he had the assistance of Madame Rauscher, Oberlin's daughter, whose husband had succeeded Oberlin in his pastorate, with full access to his complete and careful diary of more than sixty years, and whatever writings were left by Oberlin. In his preface he says: "I am going to relate his life with sincerity and truth. The family of Oberlin, to which I have been bound by fraternal friendship for nearly forty years, has been kind enough to confide numerous manuscripts of the illustrious deceased to me; other friends have furnished me notes; my own remembrances have done the rest."

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The result was an exhaustive compilation of facts which are well-nigh unreadable in form. A limited edition, intended for the parishes of Oberlin and the Alsatians who were then acquainted with his work in their mountain country, was sold by subscription. It soon passed out of print; few copies are now in existence.

Some minor biographies gleaned from this work were published in Germany, France, and England at about the same period, rather in the style of memoirs than in balanced biographies. None, I think, was given in what seems to me the necessary historical setting. These also have gone the way of this kind of literature for more than half a century.

The perusal of Stoeber's *Life of Oberlin*, a copy of which I obtained in France, perhaps the only one in this country, led me to visit the scene of his labors. It was in the summer of 1886 that I made my first study of the little village of Waldersbach in the mountains of the Vosges. Less than a hundred houses comprise it, prominent among which is the manse which Oberlin built and in which he lived. It was occupied at the time by the pastor whose accomplished wife is the granddaughter of Oberlin. Sixty years had then passed since Oberlin's death, but the

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house remained almost entirely as he left it. His library was there, his manuscripts which were accessible, and much of his furniture as aforetime. The church near by was without change in appearance since he preached in it his last sermon.

Sixteen years afterwards it was my privilege to repeat this visit, taking abundant time of several weeks to acquaint myself with the country and its local history, to tramp over its steeps and study its people, to trace if possible in the conditions of the present somewhat more of the secret of this notable life hidden away in the hills among a neglected peasantry, the grace of which now nearly fourscore years after his death has not lost its charm.

I find it quite impossible to designate my indebtedness for what I have gleaned here and there, especially among the descendants of Oberlin's former parishioners and in my personal visits and interviews with the descendants of his family.

The *Vie de J. F. Oberlin, Pasteur au Ban-de-la-Roche*, par D. E. Stoeber, is the established authority for the facts of Oberlin's life and work which I have undertaken to retell. *Le Ban-de-la-Roche, Notes Historiques et Souvenirs par*

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Mme. Ernest Roerich, has placed me under obligations in the way of local history.

It has seemed to me that a life so remarkably prophetic in its anticipations of many modern educational theories and methods, so entirely in advance of its day in the apprehension of the brotherhood of man and in the largeness of Christian fraternity and in his theories of social betterment and service, so unique and heroic in Christian consecration, with its lessons and inspirations for an age in which the temptations are great to unduly exalt the material, should be recalled and remembered. As a study of sympathy with people in low conditions and of faith in their possibilities through the application of Christian truth exemplified in a great life, the story of Oberlin must be significant.

The fact, moreover, that a great institution of learning like Oberlin College bears and honors his name with the rich inheritance of his spirit, should add interest to the history of this remarkable man.

INTRODUCTION

I AM very glad to respond to Dr. Beard's request to add a word of introduction to his life of Oberlin. As president of the college that is proud to bear Oberlin's name and counts that name one of the richest parts of its inheritance, it is perhaps not unnatural that I should be asked to speak this introductory word; and I do this all the more gladly because I have myself read the manuscript with great interest.

But, quite aside from these personal connections, it is a pleasure to speak any word that may help at all to bring to others acquaintance with the great soul here portrayed; for I am convinced that few lives deserve so well to be kept before the attention of men as the life of Oberlin. Just because Oberlin was, to use Dr. Beard's own words, "a unique figure in missionary consecration and service, a great man who lived a great life in isolation, who yet made himself felt beyond the boundaries of France, an educational and theological prophet, anticipating much modern thought in both directions," the record of his life cannot fail to be full of suggestion along many