

British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagonism and Ambivalence, 1860-1914

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In 1975 Paul Kennedy wrote that ‘yet another survey of the much-traversed field of Anglo-German relations will seem to many historians of modern Europe to border on the realm of superfluity’.⁽¹⁾ Even so, the intervening 37 years has seen no slackening off of the interest of both scholars and the general public in this particular international relationship. A steady stream of works – some scholarly, some more populist in tone – dealing with all aspects of Anglo-German relations in the 19th and 20th centuries continues to issue forth from publishers year after year ⁽²⁾, with the result that students and scholars seeking to get to grips with the subject are faced with a mountain of secondary material to wade through before they even begin to engage with the primary sources. This is particularly the case with what remain the most popular and familiar periods for teaching and research: the deterioration of Anglo-German relations in the run-up to the First World War and the policy of appeasement in the 1930s. One might therefore be forgiven for asking oneself if yet another book on Britain’s relationship with Germany in the period between 1860 and 1914 is either necessary or justified (especially when there are other periods with have yet to be examined in detail). But as Richard Scully points out in his introduction to *British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagonism and Ambivalence, 1860-1914*, despite all the gallons of ink spilt in discussing it the period covered by his book remains ‘perhaps one of the best known, but least understood, phases in Britain’s association with Germany’. (p. 1)

Until fairly recently discussions of Anglo-German relations in the period between German Unification and the outbreak of war in 1914 were primarily concerned with high politics, economic rivalry and military

developments; but over the past ten years or so there has been a 'cultural turn' in the study of Anglo-German relations that has seen scholars increasingly focus on the social and cultural relationships that underpinned diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.⁽³⁾ This has led, as Scully points out, to something of 'a new consensus' in which scholars have come to acknowledge that the traditionally narrow focus of research had led to 'a significant problem of perspective' which bequeathed a misleading impression that the story of Anglo-German relations in this period was one of growing antipathy and antagonism (pp. 1–2). This old "'Antagonism" paradigm' has increasingly been rejected by historians who, often borrowing from other disciplines, have demonstrated that it is 'impossible to tell the Anglo-German story without accounting for cultural affinities, intellectual cross-fertilizations, social connections, and mutual admiration' (p. 3). Scully falls firmly into this camp, arguing that by expanding the source-base on which historians draw from a narrow focus on diplomatic documents and economic statistics to one that includes 'cultural forms of evidence', they can give a much better picture of just how complex and ambivalent the Anglo-German relationship was in the years before the Great War. This then is the approach taken by Scully in this book. While he makes no claim to present 'a "total history" of Anglo-German cultural relations in this period', Scully seeks to use 'a broad sample of still largely neglected and poorly understood cultural forms (cartography, travel literature, literary and popular fiction, and political cartoons)' to 'best illustrate the unfolding of British cultural and intellectual debates over Germany' (p. 4) in the period 1860–1914 and in so doing show that the traditional view of the rise of 'antagonism' and popular Germanophobia is inaccurate.

However, although the broadening of the types of sources used to study British attitudes towards Germany does allow Scully to challenge the "'Antagonism" paradigm', he might have done so even more effectively if he had chosen a less orthodox periodization for his study. Although the First World War undoubtedly caused a *shift* in Anglo-German relations, it did not necessarily mark the decisive *break* that Scully and many other historians have thought – that only came when another world war seemed to confirm the stereotype of the barbarous, warlike Hun. Anglo-German cultural relations in particular resumed rapidly after 1918 and throughout the inter-war period many Britons expressed interest in, as well as sympathy and admiration of, Germany. A longer view therefore might have enabled Scully to underline the continuities and changes in Britain's 'cultural relationship' with Germany and to more effectively and decisively show the complexities and ambivalence inherent in it.

The book is divided into four sections, each made up of four chapters, dealing with one of the 'cultural forms' mentioned above. In the four short chapters that make up part one Scully examines the previously largely neglected subject of the 'cartographic freemasonry' that existed between British and German mapmakers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and demonstrates how maps and atlases both helped Britons to conceptualise Germany and reflected their changing attitudes and prejudices. Scully demonstrates that 'British cartographers only gradually altered their conceptions of what "Germany" could mean' (p. 15) as old boundaries and differentiations between regions and states continued to be used for quite some time after national unification in 1871. This reflected as much the continuation of an earlier perception of Germany as a mere 'geographical expression' rather than a nation state as the desire of British cartographers not to have to meet the expense of producing new maps to tally with the changing international situation. At the same time, the colouration of Victorian ethnological maps of Europe perpetuated the notion of Anglo-German racial and cultural affinities (pp. 27–36), while the colouring of maps of Africa both reflected and soothed Anglo-German colonial rivalries (pp. 22–3). However, as time went on such fraternal attitudes became increasingly strained. Even if, as Scully demonstrates, the close relationship between British and German mapmakers lasted right up until the outbreak of war in 1914, after 1890 growing naval and colonial rivalries were increasingly reflected in their work, as evidenced by the fact that the term 'German Ocean' – once used interchangeably with the now more familiar 'North Sea' – increasingly took on menacing and negative connotations to British cartographers and was slowly phased out (p. 25).

Part two deals with another 'cultural form' that has previously received comparatively little attention from historians of Anglo-German relations, British narratives of travel in Imperial Germany. Here Scully demonstrates not only that Germany (or at least certain regions of it) remained a popular destination for

British travellers and tourists right up until the outbreak of war but also that ‘British authors continued to produce positively-themed memoirs and accounts of their journeys therein’ (p. 46). Following on from other authors such as Rudy Koshar (4), chapter five looks at the ubiquity of the *Baedeker* guidebook amongst 19th-century British tourists and suggests that the influence these had directly on British travellers or via native imitators demonstrates both that ‘there was something resembling the “freemasonry” evident between British and German cartographic printers ... among other printers and publishers as well’ (p. 48) and that by the 1880s ‘the most dominant voice in pointing British travellers in the direction of “what ought to be seen” ... was ... a definitely German one’ (p. 49). Even so, well into the 1910s these books to some extent perpetuated British views of the ‘old’ Germany, dealing as they did with regions rather than the German Empire as a whole (p. 64).

Having looked at guidebooks Scully then goes on to examine the memoirs and travelogues produced by British visitors to Germany and again we see a how little British positive attitudes towards their ‘German cousins’ were effected by the changing diplomatic climate. Although the Franco-Prussian War did produce a brief flowering of sympathy for the French it barely disrupted British travel to Germany. Indeed, in many ways it stimulated interest in Germany and after the conflict was over many more Britons travelled to the new German Empire than ventured to the French Third Republic (pp. 57–8). Although the prohibition of gambling in the Rhenish spa resorts made fashionable by the Prince of Wales to some extent altered patterns of (upper- and upper-middle-class) travel, the traditional destinations favoured by British tourists – the Rhineland, the Black Forest – remained popular until the outbreak of the Great War and beyond. Similarly, the travel narratives of British tourists continued to display positive attitudes towards Germany and the Germans in which the racial and cultural links between the two nations and peoples were often alluded to. After 1900 the changing diplomatic situation had little effect on the popularity of travel to Germany or the generally positive flavour of their memoirs of the experience which displayed ‘a lingering bias towards the Germans’ (p. 77) As late as 5 August 1914 the Great Eastern Railway was advertising holidays in the Harz Mountains and around 6000 British holiday-makers were stranded in Germany by the outbreak of war, many of whom opted to stay put and wait out the crisis rather than be repatriated (pp. 79–80).

Although some of the authors and narratives examined in part two are familiar – Jerome K. Jerome, the author of *Three Men in a Boat* who spent a year in Germany and published two comic novels based loosely on his experiences is the obvious example – Scully does an excellent job in uncovering many more obscure accounts of travel to Germany in order to underline that British attitudes did not necessarily keep pace with the changing international situation and that the degree of popular Germanophobia has previously been overstated. Where he falls down is when he strays outside his chosen period. Rather than providing a brake on British tourism, as Scully suggests, the unstable political and economic situation in post-war Germany in fact stimulated British travel to Weimar and later Nazi Germany.(5) Similarly, the *Baedeker* guides of 1923, 1925, 1926 and 1929 (whose publication could itself be seen as evidence of a strong interest amongst British travellers in Germany) were not ‘the only handbooks ... to appear before the outbreak of the Second World War’ (p. 82).(6)

If the sources used in section two will be unfamiliar to most readers, those used in part three, which deals with the well-worn subject of how Germany and the Germans were represented in British literature of the period, will almost certainly not be. Scully concedes that this literary evidence has been examined by the authors of ‘nearly every major work on Anglo-German relations in the period before the outbreak of the Great War’ (p. 85), but he challenges what he sees as the tendency of both historians and literature scholars to preserve ‘a rather archaic distinction between “literary” works ... and those texts ... which are more commonly regarded as “popular fiction”’, arguing that a true understanding of the cultural attitudes expressed in these works can only be achieved by viewing them ‘in tandem’ (pp. 86–7). This approach leads Scully to conclude that rather than being a ‘cultural reflection of moves towards outright antagonism’ literary sources actually reveal an ongoing debate in British literature in which Germany was seen (in a phrase borrowed from Gisela Argyle) ‘as simultaneously “model” and “monster”’ (pp. 85–6). Scully is right to conclude that the image of Germany presented in British literature of the period is much more ambivalent than some would have us believe, and he provides detailed analyses of a number of novels including

Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), Gissing's *The Crown of Life* (1891), Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), Forster's *Howard's End* (1910) and Sybil Spottiswoode's *Her Husband's Country* (1911) to back up his point. However, this argument is hardly new: both Peter Edgerly Firchow and Petra Rau (whose 2009 book on *English Modernism, National Identity and the Germans* [\(7\)](#) is surprisingly absent from Scully's notes) have argued something similar in recent years.

Part four looks at the ways in which Germany and the Germans were represented in the cartoons published in satirical magazines such as *Punch*, *Judy*, *Fun* and *John Bull*, and judging from the length of this section (around 210 pages – about two thirds of the whole book) and his previously published work, this is where the author's interest really lies. In a series of chapters that chart the changing ways in which Germany was represented by British cartoonists, from the Wars of Unification to the outbreak of the First World War, the reader is provided with a succession of incisive 'readings' of these cartoons that demonstrate that 'Germany was not represented simply as a nation which inspired increasingly negative caricatures' but rather in a much more ambivalent way. Although many of these cartoons will be familiar to readers as illustrations to previous studies of the period, Scully argues persuasively that rather than treating cartoons as 'mere illustrations' historians should recognise them as a key source that allows them to gauge 'the fluidity of the perception of key figures or event events by society over time' (p. 133) and get a better feeling for the spirit of the age. This very much ties in with the so-called 'cultural' and 'visual' turns in the historiography of modern Germany in which has increasingly borrowed from other disciplines to examine what have traditionally been dismissed as the ephemera of popular culture as a means of mapping the cultural and imaginative landscape of society. [\(8\)](#)

Over the course of four chapters Scully shows how Germany went from being represented as a diminutive bit-player in European affairs to a dynamic and youthful nation (as exemplified after 1888 by her young Kaiser) that could not be ignored by the other Great Powers. From the 1870s 'the image of Germany itself became subsumed under representations of a single individual', first in the form of the 'Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck and later in the figure of Wilhelm II who 'seemed not only a representative, but the very incarnation of the "waxing vigour" of his nation' (p. 213). Wilhelm's youth, dynastic connection to the British royal family and distinctive appearance all ensured that he became a favourite of British cartoonists, but his later wartime portrayal as a bloody-handed monster (in images such as Bernard Partridges 'The Triumph of "Culture"' which appeared in *Punch* in August 1914) has often led historians to believe that pre-war cartoonists portrayed him (and often therefore his nation) in a more consistently negative light than was the case. Scully demonstrates that although British cartoonists' portrayal of the Kaiser (and of Germany more broadly) veered between mockery, censure and approval throughout this period, these representations did not necessarily reflect diplomatic events and were certainly did not reflect a steady decline towards 'antagonism'.

It is both one of the strengths and one of the weaknesses of this book that it leaves the reader wanting more. On the one hand, in the earlier brief chapters some fascinating ideas are sometimes posited but are not elaborated upon. This is perhaps to be forgiven as the author makes no pretence at providing a comprehensive account of Anglo-German cultural relations, which would in any case take a much longer volume. However, it is frustrating that some interesting ideas (such as the notion that Dickens was directly influenced by German *Bildungsroman*, or that the ubiquity of the guidebook opened up travel for 19th century women) are dealt with quite briefly, and one longs for elaboration and a more detailed analysis. On the other hand, despite its comparative length and detail, the final section on political cartoons is so fresh and interesting that one wishes for a full-length study dealing with this area of the subject alone.

On the whole the author succeeds in his stated intention of demonstrating that the period between 1860 and 1914 saw a 'growing sense of debate, and ambivalence, in British imaginings of Germany and the Germans, rather than any simple transition from admiration to antagonism' (p. 319), and this is an admirable (and very readable) attempt at a more general statement of the 'cultural turn' in the historiography of Anglo-German relations in this period. Scully gleans much interesting material from 'cultural forms' that have not previously received much attention from historians. His analysis of both maps and political cartoons gives us

a more rounded view of how cultural attitudes developed and were expressed outside the realm of 'high culture' and helps to give us a better sense of how Anglo-German relations were viewed among (or at least how they were presented to) a wider audience beyond the political and cultural elite. As such this is a welcome addition to the already vast literature on this topic, yet is far from being the last word on the subject.

Notes

1. P. M. Kennedy, 'Idealists and Realists: British Views of Germany, 1864--1939', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25 (1975), p. 137.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Among the most recent titles in English alone are John Ramsden's *Don't Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London, 2006), Richard Milton's *Best of Enemies: Britain and Germany – 100 Years of Truth and Lies* (London, 2007) and Philip Oltermann's *Keeping Up With the Germans: A History of Anglo-German Encounters* (London, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, John R. Davis, *The Victorians and Germany* (Bern, 2007), *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: Essays in Cultural Affinity*, ed. Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth (Oxford, 2008), Thomas Weber's *Our Friend "The Enemy": Elite Education in Britain and Germany Before World War I* (Stanford, CA, 2008), Petra Rau, *English Modernism, National Identity and the Germans, 1890-1950* (Farnham, 2009), Colin Storer, *Britain and the Weimar Republic: The History of a Cultural Relationship* (London, 2010), and Matthew C. Potter, *The Inspirational Genius of Germany: British Art and Germanism, 1850–1939* (Manchester, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Rudy Koshar, "'What ought to be seen": tourists' guidebooks and national identities in modern Germany and Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33, 3 (1998), 323–340.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See Colin Storer, *Britain and the Weimar Republic: The History of a Cultural Relationship* (London, 2010), chapter one; Angela Schwarz, 'British Visitors to National Socialist Germany: In a Familiar or in a Foreign Country?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, 3 (1993), 487–509 and Angela Schwarz, *Die Reise ins Dritte Reich. Britische Augenzeugen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–1939* (Göttingen, 1993).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Other examples of guidebooks for British travellers to Germany in the interwar period included John Chancellor's *How to be Happy in Berlin* (London, 1929) and Roy Elston, *Cook's Travellers Handbook to the Rhine and the Black Forest* (London, 1931).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Petra Rau, *English Modernism, National Identity and the Germans 1890–1950* (London, 2009).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See, for example, the essays in *German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory*, ed. Volker M. Langbehn (Abingdon, 2010).[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, and is grateful for both the praise as well as the comments and suggestions made by the reviewer, particularly concerning his related field of expertise.

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