

OBSERVATIONS

BY SARAH B. HARRIS

American Traits

"From the point of view of a German," America is not the Eutopia that the framers of the constitution and the first men who got the idea of federating a nation out of thirty-six independent states hoped it would soon become. Yet from so good-natured and discriminating a point of view as the one held by Professor Hugo Munsterberg, professor of psychology in Harvard university, Americans who pause to read his book can only be stimulated to more strenuous endeavor to do their part to make the nation into the ideal democracy that the fathers imagined and hoped to found.

The five essays which compose the book called "American Traits," published by Houghton, Mifflin & Co., were first published in the Atlantic Monthly, and caused from their first appearance much discussion.

Since the beginning of the Spanish-American war Americans traveling in Germany have noticed the very violent dislike entertained by Germans for Americans. The opinion of America entertained by Germany has been apparent also in the cartoons which American newspapers have republished from German papers. The cartoons are not good-natured pictures of our mistakes and of our national failings. They are drawn in spiteful hatred. The German at present is exasperated with America and he is drawing bad pictures of the Americans as little boys stick out their tongues at objects of their disapproval. Our countrymen who have to eat in German pensions spend uncomfortable half hours listening to foreign opinions of America.

Professor Munsterberg refers to this feeling in Germany against the United States and in this country against Germany: "No sincere observer can deny that the two peoples in some respects do not like each other. It is by no means hate or even animosity which separates them; it is a kind of antipathy, a half-ethical, half-aesthetic aversion. . . . The citizens of the two nations do not like one another because they do not regard one another as gentlemen; the American thinks the German servile and reactionary, narrow-minded and narrow-hearted; the German thinks the American greedy and vulgar, brutal and corrupt. As long as large circles of the population have such a feeling, all the diplomacy of the two governments can merely apply plaster to the wounds, but cannot thoroughly heal them. Only one course is open for an organic improvement: the two nations must learn to understand each other and to feel the inner accord of their real character."

Professor Munsterberg explains that the German-American who returns to his native country expatiates about the material advantages of living here; but as he has never broken down the reserve which exists between emigrants and a native population, the son of Germany returning can not speak with authority of our social life. He himself has not seen it from the inside. Because of the evils which hatred produces the author has set himself the large task of introducing the two nations to each other and making them friendly. This book of five essays he intends, he says in the preface, for the Americans to read; he has written several others to be read in Germany. In these he has collected the good points of America and the Americans. But in this book to America he points out our faults. He therefore charges no one to send a copy of the book to Germany or to send an extract from it to a German newspaper. The author seems to be very anxious that the good things he has said about Americans in German publications be not contradicted by anything he may choose

to say of Americans in America. Hence, all who read the book are in honor bound to say nothing of its contents in Germany that may choke the seed which the learned professor has planted there.

The most suggestive chapter in the book is the one on education. Our colleges and universities are but preparatory schools for the German universities. Whoever heard of a German student coming to America to finish his education? He comes sometimes to disapprovingly observe our institutions, but not to be edified. Nevertheless, occasionally Germans like Professor Munsterberg himself find our institutions and our American character are not what the cartoonists picture it. But that is another story.

The gymnasiums of Germany are the colleges of America. At eighteen the German boys have finished the drudgery of learning and are ready to compare and do the original, exploring work of the scholar, cast authority to the winds and think. American boys of eighteen are perhaps through the high school, and if at that age they have been creditably graduated their parents congratulate themselves on having brought up something especially precocious and promising. Now there is no difference between the intellects of German and American boys in favor of the former. But there is all the difference in the world between the public schools of America and the gymnasiums. Professor Munsterberg says that from his ninth year he had no instructor who was not a graduate student of the particular branch of knowledge that he taught. "I had no teacher who hastily learned one day what he must teach me the next; who was satisfied with second-hand knowledge, which is quite pretty for entertainment and orientation, but which is so intolerable and inane when we come to distribute it and to give it to others. Even the first elements of history and geography were given to us by men who had reached the level of the doctorate, and who had the perspective of their own fields. They had seen their work with the eye of the scholar, and thus even the most elementary material of their science was raised to the height of scholarly interest. Elements taken for themselves alone are trivial and empty everywhere, and to teach them is an intolerable drudgery, which fills the school room with dullness and the pupils with aversion. Elements as the introductory part of a scholarly system are of ever new and fascinating interest. A great poet once said that any man who has ever really loved in his youth can never become quite unhappy in life. A man who has ever really taken a scholarly view of his science can never find in that science anything which is quite uninteresting. Such enthusiasm is contagious. We boys felt that our teachers believed with the fullness of their hearts in the inner value of the subjects and every bit of knowledge was for us a new revelation. We did not ask whether it would break bread for us. We were eager for it on account of its own inner richness and value, and this happy living in an atmosphere of such ideal belief in the inner worth and glory of literature and history, of science and thought, was our liberal education."

For some time students of life and success have said that a four years college course is too long. None have claimed that the college graduate knew any more than enough to enable him to keep step with progress. But they have claimed that at thirty life is half lived. The college man who graduates at twenty-six and takes a three years' professional course has only put his foot on the first round of the ladder at that age and he is hopelessly dis-

tanced by the men who began to learn the technique of the profession years before. By excluding fads from the public schools and by employing teachers with a wider margin of knowledge and inspiration the time of American youth could be saved and they could be turned into the professional schools at eighteen and complete the course in their twenty-first year. In order to accomplish this electives must be discouraged.

Boys do not know what they want to make their life work until they have accumulated data for a wide comparison. In the first years of Professor Munsterberg's life botany was all his desire. "Every minute which I could spare belonged to the plants which I collected and pressed. It became a boyish passion. It lasted about three years. Then came my passion for physical instruments; an uncle gave me a dainty little electrical machine and soon the whole house was over-spun with electrical wires. A friend with theological inclinations interfered; we began to study comparative religion, Islamism in particular. Thus at fifteen years of age we learned Arabic from the Koran. Now, finally, my true vocation was found; my friend wrote prophetically in my album that we should both go out as missionaries to the Arabs—and yet I missed connection and went to Boston instead of to Mecca, and forgot on the way all my Arabic. Friends of mine soon found an old slavie grave while digging on their farm. I became fascinated with ethnological discoveries, and as important excavations were going on in the neighborhood, I spent every free afternoon and whole vacations in the ethnological camps, studied the literature of the subject, dug up urns for our town museum, and wrote at the age of seventeen a never published book on the prehistoric anthropology of West Prussia. Then the happy school days came to an end and yet I had not found myself. I have never dugged any more. I did not become an ethnologist, and if a visitor to Cambridge insists on my showing him the Harvard sights, and we come to the ethnological museum, the urns bore me so utterly that it is hard for me to believe that in earlier days they made all my happiness. I went then to the university with something like a liberal education; and when in the middle of my philosophical studies I came to psychology, the lightning struck. I thus found my life work; and in all these years I have never had an hour in which I doubted that it was my life work. Yet I did not approach it, in spite of all those various fanciful interests, before I reached the intellectual level of the graduate school. The school never took the smallest account of those inclinations and never allowed me to take the smallest step aside from the prescribed school work. My school work was not adjusted to botany at nine years because I played with an herbarium, and at twelve to physics because I indulged in noises with home-made electric bells, and at fifteen to Arabic. The more my friends and I wandered afield with our little superficial interests and talents and passions, the more was the straightforward earnestness of the school our blessing; and all that beautified and enriched our youth and gave to it freshness and liveliness would have turned out to be our ruin if our elders had taken it seriously and had formed a life's program out of petty caprices and boyish inclinations."

The foregoing long quotation from Professor Munsterberg's book is at once an example of his easy, familiar style and of his point of view, a point of view affected by his own experience and a cogent argument for a prescribed course of study.

For a German, Professor Munsterberg has advanced ideas on the woman subject; but he views with alarm the growing culture of American woman, fearing that after she has learned Greek and Latin and the ways of higher mathematics the position of household drudge will not be so eagerly sought by her as it is by the German fraulein. This may be so; but fewer marriages and choicer ones may be a solution of the question which so many mismatched couples have propounded.

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