

German American Relations

HERMANN WELLENREUTHER, *Citizens in a Strange Land: A Study of German-American Broad-sides and their Meaning for Germans in North America, 1730-1830* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2013), 384 pp.

Hermann Wellenreuther, writing about the experience of Pennsylvania Germans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, notes that “the large majority of scholars assume that magic brought the books to the potential customers” (23). While perhaps an exaggeration of the often text-centered approach to the study of printed material in early North America, Wellenreuther brings to the fore distribution and distributors, in addition to production and content, in his characterization of peddlers as “the link between producers of goods, such as printers of broadsides and books, and consumers” (23). Emphasizing the role of itinerant salesmen is just one way that he peoples his incredibly detailed story of German-language broadsides in North America in the monograph *Citizens in a Strange Land: A Study of German-American Broad-sides and their Meaning for Germans in North America, 1730-1830*.

This book should be viewed as part of a larger research project resulting in a series of end products. A group of scholars based at Georg-August University at Göttingen, including Wellenreuther, librarian Reimer Eck, and research bibliographers Dr. Carola Wessel and Dr. Anne von Kamp, crafted a plan to identify broadsides printed in North America for a German-reading audience based on the initial findings of librarian Dr. Werner Tannhoff. With funding from Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft beginning in 2000, they were able to document 1,682 examples. In addition to this monograph—in which the author often uses the first person plural “we” to describe the work undertaken—the project resulted in a printed bibliography, also published by the Pennsylvania State University Press, and an internet database hosted by Penn State’s library and available at: <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/German-LanguageBroad-sides.html>. The latter remains a living source with the ability for other researchers to add additional information and newly discovered broadsides.

The research team began by defining a broadside as being “printed on a single sheet [of paper] on either one or both sides irrespective of its contents” (3). In the context of early America, a broadside might also be known as a “handbill” or a “sheet” (6). Broad-sides could range from real estate advertisements, to hymns, to election announcements, to devotional material, to postings of stud fees for horses. Color images of 16 broadsides are included in a color section of the book; additional black and white images are found interspersed with the text. In establishing the scope of the project, Wellenreuther and his collaborators chose to exclude printed forms and hand written texts, as well as longer pamphlets and English-language broadsides. To qualify for the study, broadsides had to be printed in North America; while the team did not establish more limiting geographic requirements, they note that the book emphasizes Pennsylvania, where 215 printers practiced from 1730 to 1830 (Maryland had the next highest number at 29).

Wellenreuther’s work is informed by both European and American studies of printed material. While German scholarship often concentrates on the period before 1700, analyses of American print culture tend to be based on English-language materials. Although in recent years the German American broadside, often viewed in conjunction with hand written and colored *Fraktur*, has gained increasing attention, it remains understudied, and its content—like that of its European counterpart—associated with “sensations, catastrophes, crises, and war” (6). While North American examples do sometimes address unnerving subjects—such as the hanging of Susanna Cox, a domestic servant accused of killing her infant son—religious messages are much more common. And even Cox’s story, reprinted 32 times, becomes a means to convey a moral message. With this in mind, the chapters of the book, which separate “The German-American Secular World” and “Pennsylvania Politics and German Political Broad-sides” from “Praying and Reading,” seem somewhat artificial. Given the preponderance of Christian sentiment, it is not surprising that Wellenreuther’s so-called secular broadsides include *Haussegen* (house blessings), *Himmelsbriefe* (heavenly letters), and confirmation songs.

While *Citizens in a Strange Land* admirably documents the wide variety of broadsides available to those in British North America who read German, its author seems to underestimate the potential of his subject. He writes, “is it possible to write a kind of social history of Pennsylvania Germans on the basis of broadsides? The answer, of course, is no [...]. They *reflect* concrete and individual sections of a rather complex reality,” (49). The use of the term “reflect” emphasizes Wellenreuther’s approach to the broadsides. He views them not as an integral part of Pennsylvania German history but instead as an adjunct to the actual happenings of life. As he explains, “Through careful analysis of these broadsides we chart the perceptions and not the actual reality of the Middle Atlantic region,” (50). In making the sharp distinction between perception and reality, Wellenreuther overlooks the work of Henri Lefebvre on the social production of space, which recognizes that our world contains physical, mental, and social components. In the field of American material culture, this is further articulated by Jules Prown who writes, “History can never completely retrieve the past with all its rich complexity, not only of events but of emotions and sensations and spirit [...]. On the other hand, literature can weave small fictions into profound and true insights regarding the human condition.”¹

Wellenreuther’s choice not to engage the broadsides as embodiments, rather than reflections, of culture—to recognize that they were both shaped by human makers and users and also shaped subsequent behavior—is especially disappointing because he aptly identifies why they should make for such compelling sources. Following the lead of folklorist Henry Glassie in his plea for the importance of material culture, Wellenreuther makes the case for why broadsides are more democratic sources than “large treaties, pamphlets, or learned books,” concluding, “the average German settler could not afford to buy these larger treatises, but they could afford the cheaper broadsides” (49-50). Yet in trying to use broadsides to judge the comparative size of English and German houses, he fails to re-

alize both their limitations and their potential in reaching his stated goal of understanding the “imagination, perceptions, and visions of Pennsylvania Germans” (8).

In interpreting the broadsides, Wellenreuther engages with ideas about the past that are not always supported by historical research. For example, he assumes that all Pennsylvania German farmers would know how to use a loom when in fact weaving was a specialized trade (like printing) rather than a household task. He asserts that “most German farmers preferred indentured servants to Negro slaves” (129) with little supporting evidence. He fails to recognize the trade in used rag paper that may have affected the survival of many broadsides, and he inserts a temperance mentality into his interpretation of alcohol consumption, which was uncommon in early America. He even creates a fictional couple, Peter and Elizabeth, who make continued appearances in his narrative in order to suggest the generally unknown consumers of broadsides.

It is in his interpretation of the use of broadsides by their creators, distributors, and consumers that Wellenreuther is at his best in *Citizens in a Strange Land*. Wellenreuther demonstrates that “printing handbills, sale bills, and other single sheets was an effective and cost-conscious strategy in the political and economic worlds” (33). He is able to show the resonance of certain topics by examining how often broadsides were reprinted, and how many versions—included cheaper uncolored ones—were offered. He asks good questions about the survival of objects over time, concluding that broadsides that were linked to a discrete event (for example, an auction) usually would have been discarded soon afterward while other types of broadsides could have continued to serve as memorials or even wall decorations.

Some more intriguing analysis in the book concerns conceptions of Pennsylvania German womanhood. Wellenreuther is attentive to how women are portrayed in broadsides of various sorts. In broadsides related to courtship, women became objects, passive in their relations with men. In contrast, in numerous broadsides depicting the Biblical scene of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, illustrators and text writers suggest a more powerful role for women. Even the lack of broadsides about childbirth leads Wellenreuther to question the place of women in the

¹ Jules David Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?,” in *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*, edited by Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 15-16.

Pennsylvania German household and leads to speculation about differences among German and English families in North America. Wellenreuther knows that he does not have all the answers, asking “Did aspects of gender influence, or even shape, the broadsides or motivate the behavior of potential customers?” (110). Yet, in interpreting portrayals of women and women’s issues (or lack thereof), Wellenreuther suggests one aspect of social history that broadsides have great potential in illuminating.

Broadsides also contribute to a better understanding of ethnic identity in the colonial and early national periods in America. On this topic, Wellenreuther demonstrates the complexity of the issue. In the introduction he asserts, “one of the most important findings of this study, after all, is that precious few connections existed between the majority of Germans and their surrounding American neighbors. At least as far as their cultural and religious interests were concerned, the two societies lived side by side without significant contact” (10). The book, however, is filled with examples that contradict this statement, from the business ledger of German printer Christian Jacob Hütter, who had both English and German clients, to a loan word (*spenden* for spend) on a broadside depicting the Old Testament figure Joseph. Wellenreuther’s later conclusion—“Stressing ethnicity makes sense only from the perspective of the English majority society. We have found almost no evidence that before 1830 German settlers were concerned with this English perception, aside from the fierce discussion about the language

and German culture issue in Pennsylvania politics from the early 1740s onwards” (115)—seems a more apt characterization of German-English relations. It was not that people avoided interacting across ethnic boundaries but rather that those boundaries were flexible, especially outside of the political arena.

Citizens in a Strange Land is an ambitious book undertaken to summarize an even more ambitious project. It covers one hundred years of history and despite its focus on Pennsylvania spans a large geographic area, often making side trips to Europe to explore patterns and precedents. In attempting to cover so much, occasionally the interpretation gets muddled. After reading about Germans’ unfamiliarity with the English pounds, shillings, pence system, the reader may wonder how long British currency remained in use in the United States after the American Revolution but will have to turn to other sources to find an answer. It is the comprehensive nature of the book and the accompanying online database, however, that is the project’s greatest strength. The book’s Appendix B contains many statistical tables and even more are included interspersed with the text in the book. If Wellenreuther does not answer every question about the broadsides, he and his team have provided ample fodder for those who want to do further research. This together with their willingness to transcend the “purely textual meaning” of the broadsides (10) recommend their project to readers and researchers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Oneonta

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