

BOOK REVIEWS

Russell W. Gilbert, *Bilder un Gedanke A Book of Pennsylvania German Verse* (Breiningsville, Penna., 1975).

Pennsylvania-Germans, who comprise a cultural island within English-speaking America, have steadfastly and proudly held to their own culture for more than two hundred and fifty years. Their agricultural and industrial achievements as well as their folk-art have often received merited recognition in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and in the rest of the nation. However, their literature is scantily known beyond their own communities and among researchers in the field of Pennsylvania-German studies. Many scholars of literature and culture seem to have hesitated in exploring non-English language writings in this country; some may even be unaware of the voluminous German language literature created on the North American continent; others may have regarded the Pennsylvania-German language merely as an insignificant dialect which combines mispronounced German and English vocabularies. The language, however, which exists in a grammatically codified form, developed essentially from the High German of southwestern Germany, especially the Palatinate, and Switzerland.

The literature of our Pennsylvania-Germans is folk-literature which reflects the values of a rural-agricultural people who can boast of prolific writers since colonial days. Indeed in that early period, they even rivaled and perhaps excelled in quality and quantity the writings of English language speakers in Pennsylvania. Before the mid-nineteenth century, their written form of expression tended to be standard High German; thereafter, the distinctive Pennsylvania-German language, already common in spoken form, also became their written idiom.

The final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed both a vigorous flowering of Pennsylvania-German culture as

well as major curiosity among scholars for this cultural phenomenon. Today, with growing interest among social scientists as well as those in the humanities for the ethnic diversity of American society, a reevaluation of Pennsylvania-German culture is occurring. While reliable estimates at the end of the former century indicate the existence of approximately 750,000 speakers of Pennsylvania-German, the present number seems closer to 300,000. The force of cultural integration, a result of influences due to mass communication media, may render this distinctive culture an historic phenomenon. Consequently, it is imperative today to preserve all facets of this component of American pluralism. Such an undertaking has been a major task of the Pennsylvania-German Society which has been collecting and also publishing material in the field annually since the 1890's.

This year's volume (1975), *Bilder un Gedanke A Book of Pennsylvania German Verse*, is a major contribution towards the preservation of Pennsylvania-German literature. The author, Russell W. Gilbert, a productive lyricist during the last decades, stands proudly in the tradition of predecessors such as Henry Harbaugh and John Birmelin. Dr. Gilbert, Professor Emeritus of German since 1970 of Susquehanna University, was born in Emmaus, Lehigh County, of Pennsylvania-German stock. He was graduated from Muhlenberg College in Allentown and holds his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. His reputation in the area of folklore, literature, customs, and history of his people is well established.

Gilbert's book of verse, containing one hundred of his poems, reflects a love for his heritage and offers insight into the thoughts, hopes, and aspirations of the Pennsylvania-Germans. The author, expressing his views on poetry in the preface to the volume, writes: "Lyric poetry is the most subjective form of literature. The music of words, it should portray an idea in rhythmical, beautiful language, with an occasional touch of refreshing humor."

The volume of four cycles, in which the poems are accompanied by summaries in English, is introduced by two short stanzas: "An mei geliebdes Land" and "An mei liewi Fraa Viola". Section one, "Bilder aus der Yuchend", expresses the poet's nostalgic memories of the Pennsylvania-German homeland and its language:

Du wunnerbaari Mudderschproch,
 Was kennt mer lieber sei as du?
 Ich hab gelannt dich lieve frieh:
 Die Mammi schockelt, singt gedrei
 "Schlof, Bobbli, Schlof" un ich schlof glei;
 Dich hawwich greert an ihre Gnie.
 Was kennt mer lieber sei as du,
 Du pennsylvaanisch-deitschi Schproch?

Section two, "Gnarrenlecher" (Knotholes) views the Pennsylvania-German community in cross-section. Some poems are humorous in tone, others more melancholy as the lyricist dwells at times upon the transitoriness of this world. However, strong religious sentiment, so typical in Pennsylvania-German circles, gives constant encouragement to overcome momentary moods of despair:

Wann kennt der Baam uns saage,
 Was er doch gsehne hett
 Im Paradeis mit Eva,
 Dann waer die Schlang ken Kett.

"Riwwle", the dialect word for a mixture of flour and lard together sometimes with sugar, a combination used on yeast-risen cake, serves as the title for the third section, a collection of poems which plays upon words and upon ideas. Gilbert, in a good-natured manner, ridicules, for example, attempts to "elevate" the language by using foreign words; his delightful and playful employment of alliteration, fully in the tradition of folk-petry, underscores his lyric virtuosity: "Verfluchde Veggel fliege flink/Un fladdre fleissich Fliggel feicht; . . ."

The final cycle, "Lewesaasichde," contains works of a didactic nature coupled with poems which express a belief in

the values of a simple life. These emphasize the importance of the home, the family, and the rural-agricultural milieu. All are tempered by a religious optimism of moderation:

Bessere Zeide sin am Kumme,
Wann die Welt mol glaabt an Gott,
Wann die Lit duhn ehrlich schtrewe,
Liewe'n Nochber, wie's Gebott.

Gilbert's poetry affords an excellent glimpse into the contemporary scene of Pennsylvania-German life. He conveys the life-style of his people with masterful poetic ability and ease.

In a quest for clearer understanding of all the ethnic groups which have helped create this nation, we today are realizing ever more strongly the role eighteenth century German pioneers played in molding Pennsylvania and America. Their decendents, although considering themselves Americans, have continued their ancestor's traditions. That they have been able to maintain their cultural independence for two and one-half centuries gives witness to their vigor and also to the value of American pluralism as a dynamic component of the nation's past, present, and, hopefully, future.

The German dialect spoken in Pennsylvania is the oldest and still one of the most widely spoken non-English European languages in the United States. We are grateful to Dr. Russell Gilbert and the Pennsylvania German Society for this outstanding contribution to the field of Germanic-Americana.

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Millen Brand, *Local Lives: Poems About the Pennsylvania Dutch*. New York: Crown, 1975. 526 pp.

This book of poetry records an American born German-American's love for the Pennsylvania German heritage. It

demonstrates the vitality of the immigrant/ethnic factor in American life in terms of its impact on an individual whose ancestors came to the US. Millen Brand is of Pennsylvania German descent, but had wandered far from his Pennsylvania roots, until 1940 when he returned to the Pennsylvania German "Heimat" where he felt an inexplicable "sense of community." His immediate reaction was poetry—for thirty years he wrote about the Pennsylvania Germans.

He states: "I was impelled by a sense of valuable lives going unrecorded." Brand's poems are written in free verse in English with a sprinkling of German phrases. The poems describe, chronicle and interpret all aspects of life: meals, skills, trades, people, meetings, anecdotes, letters and even recipes. In contradiction to current trends of poetry, Brand asks: "Why should poetry give all this up?" Brand has discovered his German heritage, reclaimed it and communicates the essence of it to the reader. He consulted the standard works on the Pennsylvania Germans, Ralph Wood for example, and consulted such authorities as John J. Stoudt, Mrs. John Birmelin, Preston Barba and others.

His poems are immediately accessible to the student of German-Americana or anyone interested in immigrant/ethnic culture in America. In his poems Brand calls out to the reader to think back, listen and return to the cultural soul of our immigrant forefathers. In "The Emigrants" he writes:

Who watch today's computerized battles won,
 the latest impersonal victories,
 may think back to a different tongue,
 hear a Pentecostal shuddering,
 hear a voice speaking in the trees.
 Whose minds are clear, whose hearts are stung
 may think back to a different tongue.

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