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Book Review


This present German language edition of the reminiscences of the nineteenth century Swiss American emigrant Heinrich Lienhard consists of a biographical sketch of his life from 1822 until 1846, followed by a transcription of his personal journal recounting his life on the California Trail and his life in California between 1846 and 1849. Then follows a second biographical sketch summarizing his return home to Switzerland in January 1850, his return to California in June 1850, his second return to Switzerland in 1851-1854, and his final definitive emigration with his family to America, where he resided in Madison, Wisconsin and Nauvoo, Illinois. He died in the latter city in 1903; his life was thus the quintessence of the Swiss American experience.

Heinrich Lienhard was born on 19 January, 1822 in the hamlet of Ussbühl near Bilten, Canton Glarus. Following the example of several of his cousins, he first left Switzerland in 1843 and emigrated to New Switzerland, later Highland, in Illinois. In the spring of 1846, while working in a shop in St. Louis, he met some old friends from Galena, Illinois, with whom only a year before he had talked about emigrating to California. They were just preparing for that venture, and they persuaded him to join them in their undertaking. He disembarked from St. Louis aboard a Missouri steamer on April 26, 1846.

The westward journey of the “Five German Boys,” as Heinrich Lienhard and his four companions were called by the other emigrants, lasted six months and led them from St. Louis, Missouri to New Helvetia, also called Sutter’s Fort, in California, a settlement then under the governance of Lienhard’s compatriot Johann Sutter. At Indian Creek, Lienhard’s party joined a wagon train composed of additional California bound emigrants, and on the first day of the journey, May 12, 1846, Lienhard started a journal, of which some parts were lost.1
The present work under review provides a detailed transcription of this original journal recounting in German this particular portion of Heinrich Lienhard's peregrinations in America, as well as his first stay in California and his employment at Sutter's Fort up until the time of his departure from California in May 1849.

Heinrich Lienhard's manuscript is a document of great historical and sociological value for three reasons: First, it has been characterized as "one of the three classical reports of the great western migration of 1846." This fact is all the more important in that this particular manuscript thus illuminates the mentality of the original Anglo-American and European settlers who emigrated to California before the discovery of gold in 1848. A great deal of historical research has been devoted to the Gold Rush era of 1848-1850, and the extraordinary amount of attention given by scholars to this period has tended to obfuscate the documents pertaining to the migrations prior to 1848. The Lienhard manuscript consequently provides welcome insight into the westward migrations of the pre-Gold Rush era. It is now increasingly recognized not only that the legendary 49ers and their even more numerous followers of 1850 comprised a disproportionate percentage of all the overlanders between 1840 and 1860, but also that they stood against the grain of those overlanders in motivation. Most came not to settle or build, but to plunder and to return with their new found wealth to their homes back in the East. The Gold Rush was thus an interruption of the traditional Westward Movement, an aberration and not a climatic culmination.

Secondly, the Lienhard manuscript provides a fascinating and insightful eye-witness account of the California Gold Rush of 1848-1849 and its consequences. When gold was discovered at Coloma, California

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near Sutter’s fort on January 19, 1848—Heinrich Lienhard’s birthday—he was planting and tending a new garden of fruit trees, vines, vegetables and flowers near the Fort. He was to join the gold miners only in August and, like others, in partnership with Sutter. He saw with pain the abandonment of good and virtuous habits and was shocked by how the personalities of his comrades were deformed and degraded by the curse of the greed engendered by the notorious gold fever. These observations eventually led him to make the decision to leave California for good and to resettle in the Midwest.

Thirdly, Heinrich Lienhard’s manuscript represents a sensitive and profound interpretation of the culture of the native Indians residing at the time in California. A noted scholar on the Western Indian question, John Unruh, has noted that the Plains Indians generally cooperated with the American and European emigrants from the East and frequently provided friendly and useful assistance to these emigrants on the trail: “Indians had quickly recognized the overland caravans as the permanent advance of a civilization whose previous record in Indian relationships was deplorable. But even so, the final outcome of the increasingly frequent interaction between the two cultures was not inevitable. Indians and overlanders did not have to be juxtaposed as enemies locked in mortal combat. In fact, most were not, even during the most dangerous periods of overland travel, since firmness and caution, together with a readiness to treat the natives with friendliness and respect, generally elicited reciprocation.”

Like Unruh, Lienhard respected the indigenous people from the start as the true natives of the land. Although his early comments are not free from the typical ethnocentric views of the whites, gradually during his stay in California his perspective changed and became more culturally sensitive, and he developed what his great grandson John H Lienhard IV has described as a “Faustian hunger for understanding.”

During his stay at Mimal on the Yuba River in California, where he lived for six months in isolation from white settlers and in close con-

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contact with the indigenous peoples of the surrounding villages, he began to observe the California Indians’ daily life and marveled at their skill in basketry, hunting and fishing. He often joined them in these pursuits. His observations led him to understand that these people had organized their style of life in creative symbiosis with their surroundings, that their customs, though different, were ingenious, and that assessing them from a culturally biased Eurocentric vantage point did not do them justice. His growing understanding was extraordinary for his times and increasingly ran counter to the then dominant white views, which tended to regard the Western Indians with contempt.

Thus, Heinrich Lienhard’s manuscript represents one of the three outstanding sympathetic interpretations of the American Indian way of life, written by Swiss Americans, the second being the description of the Carolina Tuscarora written by the Baron de Graffenried at the time of the foundation of New Bern in 1710-1711, and the third being the extremely erudite and profound study of the culture of Southern Iroquoia, written by Professor Emeritus Leo Schelbert of the University of Illinois at Chicago, published in November 2009 to commemorate the Tercentenary of New Bern.6

In 1949, a granddaughter sold Heinrich Lienhard’s manuscript to the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California, where it is accessible in its original form as well as on microfilm. Yet it had already attracted the interest of people outside the immediate family in Lienhard’s own lifetime. The first to deal with the text was Kaspar Leemann, a friend from Lienhard’s days in Kilchberg (1850-54), whose edition was published in 1898 in Zürich, a reprint in 1900. However, Leemann’s version contains many errors of transcription, substantial omissions, changes and additions, so that the original is often barely recognizable. Lienhard, then approaching his eighties, was deeply disappointed as notes in the margins of his personal copy reveal.

In the United States the first partial edition, prepared by Marguerite E. Wilbur, was published in 1941 as A Pioneer at Sutter’s Fort, 1846-1850: The Adventures of Heinrich Lienhard. Wilbur translated the sections of the manuscript relating to Lienhard’s first stay in California,

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excluding his trip to Switzerland in 1849. Generally she followed the original manuscript, yet often omitted episodes that, in her opinion, had only slight historic value. This process severely weakens, partially falsifies the text and also seriously damages its authenticity.

In 1951 J. Roderic Korns and Dale L. Morgan used Lienhard’s original text as a source in their research on the “Hastings Cutoff” in Utah, since Lienhard and his companions were among the first pioneers to cross that section of the trail. In 1961 Erwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde edited a textually accurate translation of the Lienhard’s description of the California Trail under the title From St. Louis to Sutter’s Fort. Finally, John C. Abbott’s book New Worlds to Seek, published in the year 2000, is a translation of Lienhard’s text about his youth and his years in Highland, Illinois.

Thus the present Christa Landert 2010 edition of Heinrich Lienhard’s manuscript is the last in a long series of publications generated by this historical work. It is also by far the most thorough, professional and erudite edition of this important manuscript. The Landert edition includes a detailed introduction with commentaries on the genesis of the manuscript, its historical background and the previous editions. There is also a comprehensive, numerically arranged summary of all the events in Heinrich Lienhard’s life from his youth in Switzerland until his return to Switzerland on December 31, 1850. The work concludes with an index of all significant persons and historical figures involved in the history of the American Western Migration, and a “Map of the Emigrant Road” is enclosed inside the back cover. The author of this review recommends the Landert edition without reservation to all serious Americanists and genealogists.

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