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**Book Review: Seidler-Hux, Monica, *Gottfried Kellers feuriger Freund: Johann Ulrich Müller--Romanfigur, Baumeister und Kartograf der USA* [Gottfried Keller's Fiery Friend: Johann Ulrich Müller-- Character in a Novel, Architect, Builder and Cartographer of the USA]**

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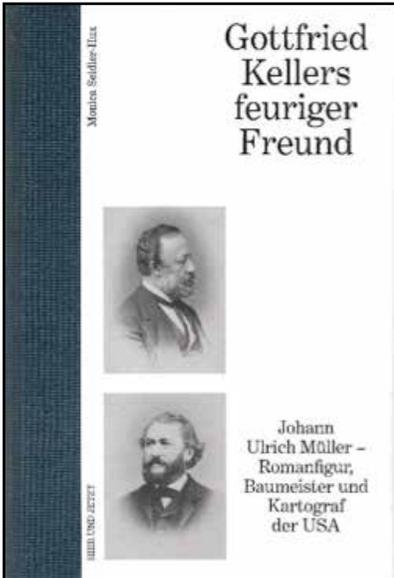
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Seidler-Hux, Monica, *Gottfried Kellers feuriger Freund: Johann Ulrich Müller—Romanfigur, Baumeister und Kartograf der USA* [*Gottfried Keller's Fiery Friend: Johann Ulrich Müller—Character in a Novel, Architect, Builder and Cartographer of the USA*] Zürich: Hier und Jetzt, Verlag für Kultur und Geschichte, 2020. 318 pp., 130 illustrations. ISBN 978-3-03919-522-0. CHF 39.00

It is safe to say that an investigation into the life of Johann Ulrich Müller would scarcely warrant the rapt scholarly attention that it does were it not for the presumptive impact of that individual on Gottfried Keller—who was and is perhaps the prime Swiss exponent of literary realism in the eyes of the world. It has been established that Keller's novel, *Der grüne Heinrich* [*Green Henry*], closely parallels the novelist's own life story, episodically shifting into near-direct autobiography. One memorable character in the novel is closely based on Keller's friendship with Müller, which had originally begun when the two were school comrades.

That nameless figure appearing in the second volume of the *Green Henry* novel is depicted as fiery, enthusiastic, and rapturously immersed in art and literature. That character, in short, for whom Müller ultimately stood as the model, was more closely attuned to Green Henry's (and thus Keller's) sensibilities than were any of the developing artist's other acquaintances.

In real life, those common inclinations found expression in an ongoing exchange of letters between Keller and Müller (the

latter a native of Frauenfeld, Canton Thurgau). Combining Seidler-Hux's expository text with Keller's novel passages and the Keller-Müller correspondence—conveniently reproduced in this attractively illustrated monograph—we get the sense that Keller felt the need to push himself, scrambling to keep up with the perceived theoretical and creative accomplishments of Müller, both as a talented artist and as a writer.

In the novel itself, however, any incipient aura of this talented friend as a model or muse—any further mention of his “glowing image” and “heroic shadow”—was to dissipate in a flash when Heinrich Lee (Green Henry) discovered that his comrade had copied long textual passages into his correspondence from great authors and philosophers rather than from the storehouse of his own creativity. In the first draft of the novel, Heinrich Lee showed some understanding for the plagiarist, reasoning that this crony had not made fun of him, but had only taken a shortcut to keep pace with his (Lee's) own zeal. A scant few pages after his first mention, then, this literary figure had awakened in Green Henry simultaneous respect, love, and hate. There was no further mention of him in the novel.

Taking into account both the novelistic exposition of Müller's blithe literary appropriation and the real-world assistance he provided to Keller during periods of poverty, we can speculate that this love-hate mix of emotions might well have mirrored Keller's true feelings. Keller scholars have generally been less forgiving, though, pegging Müller with such epithets as “swindler,” “fibber,” “unsteady character,” or “one of Keller's youthful misalliances, someone who never amounted to anything afterwards.” For literary critics up until our own 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, Müller has stood for the opposite of Keller's scrupulous honesty.

One exception to this single-minded view of Müller, almost from the beginning, has been the Guild of Thurgau Writers. Individual cantonal reviewers and journalists have made an effort to supply more comprehensive details and fairer judgments about their native son. In

particular, the Reformed pastor Walther Huber published a detailed article in the *Thurgauer Zeitung* in 1919 on the occasion of Keller's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, detailing the youthful rapport as well as he could research it. Then, in a follow-up article, he published further biographical data he had learned from Müller's family.

One century after the work of Walther Huber in Thurgau, Monica Seidler-Hux—a native of Frauenfeld engaged in the Manuscripts Division of Zurich's *Zentralbibliothek*—has found herself ideally placed by native inclinations, archival access, and research training to write the definitive tome on the Keller-Müller topic. Her own institution holds the literary papers of Gottfried Keller, while the *Bürgerarchiv* in Frauenfeld is a first resort for details on Müller's life in Thurgau and beyond.

Seidler-Hux's publication provides us with illuminating, extensive and incredibly well-documented answers to the simple but key questions she poses (p. 11): “What is reality and what is fiction—in *Green Henry* and in the biographies of Gottfried Keller? How did the relationship between the two of them come about, and how did it change? What, in actual fact, ever became of Keller's friend from Frauenfeld?”

As Seidler-Hux started following an ever-expanding search space beyond Zurich and Frauenfeld to identify the historical Johann Ulrich Müller, astonishing facts came to light (pp. 11-12 *et passim*). One finding led to another in her *Schnitzeljagd* (paper chase) for signs of Müller's life throughout the nineteenth century. A number of parallels between the life stories of the two friends became evident. In Müller's case, though, temporary financial difficulties and fruitless years as a journeyman in Switzerland, Austria, Romania, and Hungary led him to forge a new beginning in America. Further research exposed Müller's participatory contributions in North American locales and on projects which, in historical hindsight, were truly notable. His life path, as outlined by the author, served as a miniature mirror for the expansion of horizons and pioneering innovations in the initial age of technology,

industry and transportation. In that regard, the book represents the restoration of an impugned reputation. The author's rehabilitation of Müller furnishes multiple grounds for respecting him.

Müller's passionate engagement in life and learning, as originally refracted through a literary figure in a novel by Gottfried Keller, apparently never slackened in his newfound home. Seidler-Hux outlines his successes as a veduta painter, architect, civil engineer, draftsman, surveyor of the Great Lakes, cartographer, and family man in his new identity as an Americanized John U. Mueller. Causes for sadness and difficulty only intervened from overseas, from notices of family deaths and from Swiss authorities who questioned Müller's citizenship rights *ex post facto*, and thus the legitimacy of his marriage in Ohio to a Pomeranian woman he had met on his voyage to America.

The print book that houses these extensive research findings for the *Hier und Jetzt (Here and Now)* publishers has charms to draw the sensory delight of even those readers reticent to dive deeply into a work with a total of nearly 800 footnotes. Both for casual readers and for those mesmerized enough by the literary and biographical strands of intertwining narrative to immerse fully, there are the added delectations otherwise reserved for a coffee-table book, so to speak. Six-score-and-ten illustrations not only supply crowning visual commentary on the lives and works of Keller and Müller (with an emphasis on the latter, of course), but they also serve *en masse* as a visual honorarium to the reader's senses. The contrasting coarse-versus-smooth tactile duality of the book cover likewise beguiles the sense of touch (and makes the inveterate literary historian ponder further discoverable dualities in the text between the covers).

Seldom will the reader of literary or cultural history—resonant in this case with rich overtones of biography—be favored with such intellectual transparency, directness, or trust as Monica Seidler-Hux displays in devoting more than a third of her monograph to primary documentation that undergirds her thesis. Maps, timelines, literary excerpts, and, above all, the revelatory correspondence of two

consequential Swiss friends, allow the reader to weigh the author's claims. (It should be noted that the author reproduced letters to and from other relevant personalities as well, including exchanges between Keller and his mother.) An appendix with bibliographic and index navigation eases the scholarly shuttling between source and commentary—not necessarily in that order. Beneficial for the reader, and exemplary for biographical scholarship, Seidler-Hux places hefty weight and central attention on the sources, echoing the Renaissance humanists' advice: *Ad fontes* ([Back] to the sources). The textual commentary concludes as early as page 202, while the subsequent and final 116 pages provide slam-dunk documentary evidence as to the verity of the author's endeavor.

~ *Dr. Richard Hacken, Brigham Young University*