18. Historical Tales and Adventure Stories

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There is no hard and fast dividing line between moral and religious tales on the one hand and historical tales and adventure stories on the other. The moral and religious concerns of nineteenth-century children’s writers do not disappear overnight: they simply become less prominent. The telling of a gripping story, the presentation of historical events and the description of distant places and unfamiliar human activities become more important than a simple didactic message. The lure of adventure is of course present in German children’s books right from Campe’s *Robinson der jüngere* and the exploits of Baron Münchhausen and is swiftly expanded with Wyss’s *Schweizerischer Robinson*. Campe also provided exciting historical and geographical material in his books about the discovery of Central and South America and about polar exploration. But it was not until the middle part of the nineteenth century that German authors focussed more strongly on the narrative rather than didactic potential of historical and geographical themes.

Both Christoph von Schmid and C. G. Barth situate some of their stories in periods of considerable historical interest, e.g. the aftermath of the French Revolution or the Siege of Belgrade, but they do not exploit the historical material: it is simply the background for a particular set of events. The writer who took this one stage further was Gustav Nieritz (1795-1876), a Protestant schoolmaster and prolific author of children’s books, who spent most of his life in Dresden and its immediate vicinity. Nieritz was the author of nearly 120 books, the first of which appeared in 1829. He was always on the look-out for story material, which he took from many sources – his wide general reading, anecdotes, sermons and newspaper reports,
visits to taverns, plays and operas. He acknowledged a debt to Salzmann, but in his youth he was also a keen reader of stories about robbers, knights and ghosts, which were then very much in fashion. Nieritz's Protestant background is readily apparent in the stories he wrote, but he did not write with a solely religious motive. Posterity has not been kind to him. He was a workmanlike writer who turned his hand to a multiplicity of themes, but was undemanding and undistinctive in style and literary form. But in his own day he was a popular and productive author and eventually received an order of merit from the King of Saxony. Two years after his death the city of Dresden erected a monument in his memory.

Of the many books that Nieritz wrote approximately a sixth were translated into English. The earliest to be published were *The Foundling, or the School of Life* (Edinburgh: Paton & Ritchie, 1850), published in German as *Der Findling, oder Die Schule des Lebens* (1839), and *Duty and Affection* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1850), which appeared in German in 1838 as *Der junge Trommelschläger und der gute Sohn*. Paton and Ritchie were particularly interested in Christian literature, but William and Robert Chambers had a rather broader range of publications to their credit. However, with *Duty and Affection* they introduced into the annals of children's literature the non-existent author Gustav Moritz, to whom the book is assigned on the leaf after the title-page. This name presumably derives from a misreading of the name Gustav Nieritz in unfamiliar Gothic type. Unfortunately this ghost author now steps the pages of a number of respected reference works and bibliographies. A later edition by W. & R. Chambers (c. 1910) with a curiously inappropriate decoration by Mabel Lucie Attwell on the front cover removes all mention of any author. Another translation of the text, this time correctly attributed to Nieritz, was made by H. W. Dulcken with the more fitting title *The Little Drummer: or, Filial Affection. A Story of the Russian Campaign* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1856; reprinted 1856 and 1859). The popularity of the story was demonstrated by a further edition entitled *The German Drummer Boy; or, the Horrors of War*, adapted from the German by Mrs Campbell Overend (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1883). No other book of Nieritz's enjoyed so many editions over so long a time-span.

*The Little Drummer* (if we use Dulcken's title to stand for all the versions of Nieritz's story) centres on the period of the Napoleonic occupation of Germany and subsequent invasion of Russia. It was a period within Nieritz's own youth and early adulthood, so the events, figures and
mood that the book reflects derive at least partly from personal memory and not wholly from historical records. The story concentrates on the experiences of a fourteen-year-old boy, Augustus, who is conscripted into the Napoleonic army, ‘la grande armée’, that marches into Russia wreaking havoc and destruction, but eventually retreats, decimated, in misery and ignominy. The boy’s father had killed a French drummer for, as he thought, causing the death of his sick daughter, and was about to be executed by the soldiers when Augustus, following the Biblical injunction to lay down one’s life for one’s brethren, asks to be executed to save his father. Instead, Augustus is forced to be a drummer. The Russian expedition, the brutality and coarseness of the soldiers, the degradation and misery that they cause and are part of, are narrated from the shocked viewpoint of this boy who tries to put into practice what he has learnt of Christian forgiveness and loving one’s neighbour. As is the case with the stories of Schmid and Barth, Nieritz’s plot neatly produces reconciliations and positive outcomes for all the main characters, though Augustus himself suffers a broken leg in the battle of the River Berezina, and Sergeant Hoier, who is a kind of adoptive father to him in the army, loses several fingers.

The Christian message is important to Nieritz, but like so many writers of historical fiction for children – G. A. Henty is the prime example in later British boys’ books – he was also concerned to give an authentic picture of key aspects of the Napoleonic campaign. Augustus experiences the full horrors of the Battle of Borodino (5-7 September 1812), in which fifty thousand died for what he refers to as ‘a mound of earth and a ruined village’, lamenting, ‘What a price!’ Nieritz concentrates on the miseries and sufferings of war as it affects both soldiers and ordinary people. He is not concerned with over-all military strategy or political aims or with celebrating military heroism in general. What he is prepared to celebrate is individual acts of kindness within the soldiers’ exposure to extremes of bloodshed and physical deprivation.

Nieritz sees nothing to glorify in war and warfare as such, so it is not surprising to find among his other books one that centres on a particularly brutal and gory episode of the most destructive war that Europe experienced before the First World War – the Thirty Years War (1618-48). In 1846 Nieritz published Die Belagerung von Magdeburg, which was translated into English as The Siege of Magdeburg (Edinburgh: Paton & Ritchie, 1855). The sack and devastation of the Protestant city of Magdeburg by the Catholic Imperial forces under the direction of General Tilly had, for both contemporaries
and later historians, a tremendous impact on their reactions to the war and the wanton destruction of ordinary human life that it entailed.

For British children Nieritz’s books opened up new areas of historical and geographical experience. Not only did they deal with themes from the history of the Holy Roman Empire, but they also reached further afield to Tsarist Russia and early missionary activity in Greenland. Nieritz ranged widely in his search for suitable story material and provided German children with wholesome information and a strong moral and religious focus. Translations of his stories into English coincided with the period of Queen Victoria’s marriage to Prince Albert, a period that saw a considerable growth of interest in German literature and culture generally as well as German children’s books. Nieritz’s work had the clear advantage of providing useful general information about important aspects of German history within the context of sound Protestant experience; and for all his books’ easy use of stock themes and heart-tugging episodes they had a firm moral and religious core.

Among Nieritz’s stories about Germany a few more deserve further comment. *The Exiles of Salzburg, and Other Stories*, translated by Mrs L. H. Kerr (London: Religious Tract Society, c. 1885), includes *The King of Prussia’s Tall Soldier* and a very short piece called *The Belfry of Dresden* in addition to the title story. The English title of *The Exiles of Salzburg* probably alludes to the much reprinted *Elizabeth; or, the Exiles of Siberia* by the French writer Madame Sophie Cotting, first published in 1806. Nieritz’s book appeared in German in 1843 with the longwinded title *Die protestantischen Salzburger und deren Vertreibung durch den Fürst-Erzbischof von Firmian* (The Protestants of Salzburg and their Expulsion by the Prince Archbishop von Firmian). It is concerned with the persecution of Protestants by the Archbishop of Salzburg and the Jesuits and their expulsion from his territory in 1732, followed by their welcome to Prussia and Berlin by King Frederick William I. Nieritz’s story involves a young woman torn between two men who want to marry her and beset with problems arising from loyalty to her father when he is falsely accused of murder. Through and around this tale of personal distress and grief runs an account of the Bible-based Protestants’ suffering at the hands of the Catholic authorities. Nieritz describes the solemn oath that a hundred delegates of the Protestant communities swore at Schwarzach to stick to their faith, symbolizing their union by each swallowing a portion of salt, as a result of which their action became known as the Salt Alliance (*Salzbund*). He has no sympathy for the Archbishop, but tries not to utterly
blacken his character:

The archbishop, who had not naturally a cruel heart, although imbued with the deepest fanaticism of the times, felt a truly paternal affection for his subjects, and was shocked when he reflected on what he called the error of their ways. The most exaggerated reports were repeated to him respecting the public defection of the heretics; and they operated on the weak mind of the prince so powerfully that he became much alarmed, not only for his own safety, but also for that of the Catholic part of the population (pp. 86-87).

Elsewhere, however, Nieritz does not spare us from details of the harsh conditions under which the Salzburgers had to sell their property and possessions before being driven into exile, of the burning of Bibles and Protestant books in the market square of the town of Werfen, of the violence and cruelty of soldiers towards them. The book thus becomes a story of Protestant martyrdom, with echoes of an exodus to the promised land, in this instance Prussia.

Nieritz was not, however, a blind admirer of Prussia – his loyalty as a citizen was in any case to Saxony – and in *The King of Prussia’s Tall Soldier* he recounts the sad story of a rich Frankfurt merchant, Leo Librecht Hiebendahl, who, on account of his great height, is betrayed into the hands of Prussians looking for giants to be incorporated into King Frederick William’s guard regiment. Librecht’s treacherous book-keeper Blitterman increasingly takes over the business and household and dismisses all who are sympathetic to their former master. In this way Librecht’s nephew Bertram is also dismissed. One day in September 1738 while on guard in Berlin Librecht catches sight of his nephew, but cannot follow him. He asks a handsome young man who comes out of the castle to help him contact Bertram. The young man happens to be the Crown Prince, the future Frederick the Great, and he does help him to find Bertram, who is given letters to various people in Frankfurt explaining Librecht’s plight. A little later Librecht sees a newspaper announcement that Blitterman has married his wife. He absconds, but is captured two days later and condemned to run the gauntlet ten times. Before this can take place, a family whose son Librecht has saved from drowning in the River Spree intercede with the King and obtain mercy for him. He is discharged from the King’s service and exiled from Prussia. Meanwhile, it turns out that Blitterman had inserted the wedding announcement before the event took place, and that Librecht’s wife had refused to marry him. Librecht and his wife are thus reunited, and Blitterman drowns himself in despair. Nieritz requires a large number
of coincidences and implausible events to construct his plot and bring
the story to a satisfactory conclusion, but he certainly creates a gripping
narrative. Frederick William I’s regiment of giant grenadiers constitutes just
one of the King’s many unpleasant traits, and unscrupulous methods were
necessary to find tall men to fill it. The regiment was disbanded after his
death. Nieritz’s cameo picture of the future Frederick the Great is testimony
to the extraordinary number of anecdotes that his unique personality gave
rise to, perhaps particularly as a reaction to the brutality and coarseness of
his father.

Nieritz was, in many of his books, fierce against rulers and men in
positions of authority who abused their power. He was tireless in using
history to provide examples of the suffering that such misdeeds and
wickedness brought about. His ideal was a state of order, mutual respect
and an acceptance of mutual responsibilities, but he recognized that the
world was imperfect and did not shun describing its harsher side. The
dangers and temptations inherent in the wielding of political power form
the subject of one of his most popular stories – Alexander Menzikoff oder:
Die Gefahren des Reichtums (Alexander Menzikoff or the Dangers of Wealth)
(1834). This cautionary tale tells how a man of humble birth becomes the
favourite of Tsar Peter I and then prime minister, field marshal and prince.
Having already divorced his wife, Menzikoff marries a second time. In the
enterprise of founding St. Petersburg he is publicly berated and beaten by
the Tsar for failures in bridge-building. Later, further corruption comes to
light. On Peter’s death he succeeds in naming Peter’s widow, Catherine,
as Empress and then himself becomes the virtual ruler of Russia. He
betrothes his eldest daughter to the young Tsar, Peter II, but eventually
Menzikoff’s enemies succeed in having him arrested, stripped of his titles
and possessions and exiled to Siberia. Menzikoff’s second wife becomes
ill and dies en route. His faithful servant, Micheloff, turns out to be his
own son by his first marriage, and his mother is Menzikoff’s first wife.
Depressed and contrite, Menzikoff builds a new church, in which he and
his first wife remarry.

Nieritz embroiders the life of the historical Alexander Menshikov
(1673-1729) with picturesque details of his own, but the broad outline is
true enough. As with his other books, the context corresponds to known
historical facts, while the more intimate plot, not always entirely plausible
or convincing, embodies details and characters of the author’s making.
There were at least three different editions of the book in English. The first
bore the title *Alexander Menschikoff, the Founder of a Family* (Edinburgh: T. Constable & Co., 1855). A different translation appeared ten years later entitled *The Perils of Greatness: the Story of Alexander Menschikoff* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1865). Neither edition identifies the translator. A third version, this time credited to Mrs Alexander Kerr, has the title *Menzikoff, or the Danger of Wealth* (London: Religious Tract Society, [1894]). The Nimmo edition gives the spelling ‘Menschikoff’ only in the title; in the text it is as with the other two editions and the German original. The modern English transliteration is now usually Menshikov. The RTS edition has the subtitle ‘a story founded on fact’, corresponding to the claim of the German that it was ‘a true story, told to provide entertainment in family circles’. Nieritz was not content to be a purely fictional writer. He always seems to be happier when telling a story with a clear basis in historical and geographical reality, even if he has to invent characters and a plot to unfold within that reality. The books nonetheless abound with well-documented details that Nieritz derived from his extensive reading. He was not a particularly original writer, but his blend of factual information and a firm moral and religious outlook with a plot that can engage a young person’s attention gave his stories great popularity in Germany. In Britain his readership probably had more of a religious character, but the expansion of such subject-matter to include German history, legend and culture should not be underestimated as interest in all things German grew in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As Gustav Nieritz was the chief writer of historical tales to be translated into English, we can also reckon Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816-72) to be the principal author of German adventure stories. His work follows in the wake of the various German Robinsonades and books about exploration by writers such as Joachim Heinrich Campe. Gerstäcker was born in Hamburg and began training as a merchant in Kassel, but then broke off and turned to agriculture. In 1837 he emigrated from Bremen to the United States of America and travelled widely there, taking work as a hunter, logger, cook, sailor, stoker, silversmith, farmer and hotelier before returning in 1843 to his mother in Dresden. In 1849 he set off on a world voyage to South America, California, Hawaii, Tahiti and south-east Australia, returning once more to Dresden in 1852.

From the mid 1840s onwards he wrote extensively about his travels and used his experiences as the basis for a large amount of adult and juvenile fiction. Several of his books were translated into English. Early works to be
translated were *Der Deutschen Auswanderer Fahrten und Schicksale*, which D. Black translated as *The Wanderings and Fortunes of some German Emigrants* (London: D. Bogue, 1848), and *Die Flußpiraten des Mississippi* (1848), which was translated as *The Pirates of the Mississippi* (London, 1856). *Gold! Ein Californisches Lebensbild aus dem Jahre 1849* (1858) appeared a year later as *Each for Himself; or, the Two Adventurers* (London, 1859), while *Der kleine Goldgräber in Californien* (1858) took a little longer to be translated as *The Young Gold-Digger; or, a Boy's Adventures in the Gold Regions* (London, 1860).

An Australian novel, *Die beiden Sträflinge* (1857) appeared in the same year as *The Two Convicts*. Further titles saw the light of day in the 1860s.

A more detailed look at one of Gerstäcker's novels perhaps gives a better idea of his attractions to a young reader.

His novel *Der kleine Wallischfänger* (1856) was translated into English as *The Little Whaler; or, the Adventures of Charles Hollberg* and was illustrated by Harrison Weir (London and New York: G. Routledge & Co., 1857). Another edition was published in 1876. The 1850s were the decade of books about whaling, with both Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and W. H. G. Kingston's *Peter the Whaler* appearing in 1851. Whether these books were a factor in Gerstäcker's writing is uncertain, since in any case *The Little Whaler* contains a great deal that links up with his own recent voyage to the South Atlantic and the Pacific. The book has very little by way of plot. The young German protagonist, Charles Hollberg, dejected about the prospect of undergoing training in a commercial firm in Hanover, goes on holiday with his parents to the island of Heligoland. He becomes friendly with an old sailor, Jahn, who takes him out in his boat and gives him a taste of the sea. On the final day of the holiday Charles, against all he has ever been told by his father, goes alone in a boat to look for Jahn and becomes fog-bound. He rescues from the water a man who turns out to be quite a villain, and soon afterwards the two are picked up by a whaler, which, coincidentally, Charles had seen being refitted in Hamburg. The rest of the book deals with the whaler's two-year voyage to the South Atlantic, the Falkland Isles, Cape Horn, Juan Fernandez, the Sandwich Islands (i.e. Hawaii), the North Pacific, Tahiti and Fiji. In Tahiti Charles stumbles across his sailor friend Jahn again, and the man he had rescued from the sea is arrested as a murderer. Charles returns home on a German brig and is reunited with his family.

The book is explicitly modelled at the beginning on the structure of *Robinson Crusoe*, which has formed a crucial part of Charles's early reading and childish play. Like Crusoe too, Charles disobeys his parents and as a
result finds himself anxiously separated from them for a protracted period of time. But while Crusoe spends long years learning how to survive on a desert island, Charles’s voyages may be seen as resembling, in a very distant fashion, those of Odysseus, for when Charles returns home it is the dog, Nestor, who first recognizes him, despite the fact that as a child Charles had tormented him by shooting arrows at him.

The young Charles’s negative feelings about training for business and his subsequent travels around the world obviously pick up on Gerstäcker’s own experiences. Charles’s boyhood reading of Le Vaillant’s *Hunting Adventures in Africa* and Cook’s and Kotzebue’s *Voyages in the South Seas* surely reflects what must have been available to Gerstäcker as a boy too. With the sight of Juan Fernandez Barthels, the older sailor who takes particular care of Charles on the whaler, explains the connexion with Robinson Crusoe through the fact that Alexander Selkirk, the real-life model for Crusoe, was marooned there for many years. The mention of Juan Fernandez may well combine literary and historical information with Gerstäcker’s personal knowledge, since he travelled extensively in the Pacific.

In Hamburg Charles’s attention is riveted by the many ships and boats he sees in the harbour, among them the *Kamehameha*, the rough-looking whaler that he will later find himself unexpectedly working on for two years. There too is a ship crowded with emigrants to the United States such as Gerstäcker himself would have sailed on. He paints a touching picture of the emigrants, the widely scattered parts of Germany that they come from, their mixed emotions at leaving their native country ‘in all probability for ever’. Mrs Hollberg expresses sympathy with the poor people, but Mr Hollberg shrugs his shoulders, retorting, ‘Why . . . poor people? It is all their own doing: no one forces them to go away. Why do they not remain here?’ A tall, thin man standing close by asks him whether he has ever been hungry and makes the point that it is economic necessity that drives people to emigrate. German immigration into the American colonies had begun in the early eighteenth century, but the large-scale exodus from Germany that Gerstäcker is alluding to relates to the agricultural depression, crop failures and displacement of handicrafts that characterized the 1840s. By 1860 there were over a million German-born residents in the United States, about a quarter of the total number of foreign-born settlers. This cameo picture of a departing emigrant ship in *The Little Whaler* is just one of many episodes that demonstrate how the adventure story is firmly rooted in the reality of the day.
Like so many children’s books, *The Little Whaler* begins with a holiday that then turns into an adventure. Charles’s mother has been prescribed a regime of sea-bathing, and if it suits her the family will stay there a few weeks, but the holiday on the small island of Heligoland is a disappointment for the youthful enthusiast of Robinson Crusoe. Gerstäcker gives very little description of the island, since his chief purpose is simply to use it as the setting for Charles to learn how to use a boat and expand his knowledge through listening to Jahn’s accounts of his voyages round the world. Heligoland, which had previously been a dependency of Holstein and thus subject to Danish rule, had been gained by Britain in 1807 and ceded to her in 1814. The inhabitants, however, were German and spoke Low German, their main links being with Hamburg.

British readers had been able to learn more about the island from a young woman who had spent four years there as a girl, her father having served with the regiment stationed there. *Heligoland: or, Reminiscences of Childhood*, by M. L’E[strike-through]. (London: John W. Parker, fifth edition, 1851), is a slim book, most of it centring on the author’s heart-rending experience of losing both her mother and father to a fatal illness on the island whilst she was only a child. However, she does provide nearly twenty pages of description of the history, appearance, inhabitants and culture of Heligoland, and there are two attractive lithographs showing a view of the island from the sea and typical adult male and female costumes. The editor of M. L’Estrange’s little book declares the existence of Heligoland to be almost forgotten in England, but it was obviously known to Gerstäcker as a holiday resort for the well-to-do in Germany.

As with *The Swiss Family Robinson*, a large part of *The Little Whaler* is taken up with providing detailed information about geography, natural history, climatology, astronomy and the like. There are sections devoted to explaining the trade winds, the formation of coral islands, the nature of icebergs, the habits of penguins on the Falkland Isles and, of course, the arduous job of whaling. The pursuit and slaughter of different species of whale, the dangerous task of extracting oil and dealing with blubber, the filth and stench that the process entails, the sailors’ exposure to the elements and enforced continuous work once a whale has been caught – all this is recounted in copious detail. It is not a story for the squeamish, but any boy reading the book would come away armed with a mountain of facts, not only to do with the rigours of whaling, but also covering a wide range of interesting incidental information.
Gerstäcker was not the only German author of boys’ adventure stories during the nineteenth century, though in the mid century he was the most widely read. With his tales of travel and daring deeds in America he was following in the footsteps of the Austrian Karl Anton Postl (1793-1864), who used the pseudonym Charles Sealsfield. Sealsfield’s most famous book, *Das Kajütenbuch* (1841), was translated by S. Powell as *The Cabin Book; or, National Characteristics* (London, 1852), and another book, *Scenes and Adventures in Central America*, was edited by F. Hardman (Edinburgh and London, 1852). Though popular and admired in the German-speaking countries, Sealsfield never acquired a comparable reputation in Britain, though his American subject-matter proved more attractive to readers in the United States. Towards the end of the nineteenth century another writer of adventure stories gained a devoted readership in Germany. This was Karl May (1842-1912), whose books, especially those dealing with American Indians, are still widely read today. However, none of his books appear to have been translated into English during the period with which we are concerned, probably because there was an ample supply of the same kind of material from the pens of native British authors such as W. H. G. Kingston, R. M. Ballantyne, G. A. Henty and many more.