

KARL CHRISTOPH REICHE (1740-1790) AND AMERICA

by

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This essay is an attempt to reconstruct the career of Karl Christoph Reiche,¹ a man who gained brief European notoriety as a controversial "reformer" of the German book trade and then emigrated to America after the collapse of his quixotic enterprise. Reiche was born in Berlin in 1740, and at the age of twenty entered the University of Frankfurt an der Oder where he studied with the famous philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, an outspoken critic of what he considered the exploitative practices of German publishers. His young disciple was deeply impressed by these sentiments.² Reiche left Frankfurt after a year at the request of university officials, being guilty of an outspoken rationalism in religious matters. (His real "fault" seems to have been a short temper and a tendency to get into scrapes).³ During the next fifteen years, after finishing his theological studies at Halle, he changed his residence frequently, working as minister, teacher, book dealer (in Berlin) and author. In the late 1770's he was called to the more congenial atmosphere of Dessau to teach at Johann Basedow's famous Philanthropinum.⁴ There, with the support of the reigning Prince Leopold Friedrich Franz, Reiche was able to put his ideas into practice, and launched the Buchhandlung der Gelehrten. The plan of allowing authors to publish their own books and thus eliminate publishers' profits, which, rightly or wrongly, were thought

to be outrageously high, was not really new; Klopstock's Gelehrtenrepublik outlined a similar scheme. Reiche's venture was, however, even if only for a few years, the most successful attempt of any to bypass the regular book trade.

The Buchhandlung was a non-profit corporation chartered by Prince Leopold in January, 1781, and empowered solely to be a distributing agency for books, prints and music. The cost of printing was to be borne by the authors (or their patrons). In all other respects the Buchhandlung functioned as a publishing house, taking orders, distributing books to other booksellers at the *Berichte der allgemeinen Buchhandlung der Gelehrten* (1781-84). Prospective authors were intrigued by royalties of 66 2/3% while tending to forget that they had to pay all the printing costs.⁵ The firm met stubborn opposition from the regular book trade and its allies.⁶ Furthermore, intermittent boycotting of the Buchhandlung at the Leipzig Fairs forced Reiche to enroll local agents and supporters throughout Germany. The *Berichte* for July, 1781, lists 170 nominal agents, including tradesmen, artists (Daniel Chodowiecki in Berlin being the best known), and such writers as Goethe, Wieland, Herder, Lavater and Lichtenberg. One year later, the number of titles listed by the Buchhandlung had reached 341.⁷

The obligation to distribute any book offered him, including many unsaleable items, became a heavy burden. "It is not our intention," he once complained, "to flood the world with new books" (Kapp and Goldfriedrich, III, 168). To the enmity of the regular trade were added the complaints of frustrated author;⁸

and even if Reiche were a superior businessman (which he was not) the collapse of the venture seemed imminent.⁹ In his search for new markets, Reiche conceived a plan to export German books to America. This was the first project of its kind to be suggested by a member of the German book trade, and although the cooperation of other publishers was never obtained, it remains a tentative first step to the more durable commercial ties of the nineteenth century.

Die Buchhändlerzeitung (Hamburg), Germany's first real book trade journal, carried a report from Philadelphia dated April 29, 1783, which very probably came to Reiche's attention. It read in part:

...The state of learning here is far more prosperous than one would suppose in, as it were, a new born country. In the midst of the troubles of war really useful knowledge is not forgotten. The College here has been elevated to a University. The German language has become a subject of public instruction--something not even done everywhere in Germany. In order to preserve it in its purity, which is beginning to be lost, Herr Pastor Kunze was named as Professor, and we expect much from the zeal and insight of this man. The only thing lacking is an adequate supply of good German books, and for the time being, also the opportunity to obtain them, even though our German fellow citizens are not especially enthusiastic about reading. Certainly there is more urgent business now than that....¹⁰

Reiche's response (and whether it was really inspired by the Philadelphia letter is only conjecture) was first published in the Berichte of November 1783, and later reported in the Buchhändlerzeitung.¹¹ First he analyzes the depressed condition of the German book trade in 1783:

Has anyone ever calculated the really astounding number of books which, from Fair to Fair are published in our Fatherland? One may credibly estimate

that over two million [sic] volumes, large and small, are printed yearly in Germany.... It becomes evident that to dispose of all our published books in Germany is simply impossible. Even editions of good authors remain in large part unsold and must be pulped unless a way out is found, and markets fostered outside Germany in heavily populated, and cultivated lands and provinces."

For Reiche, "the islands and especially the vast lands of the Free States of America," are the only answer. "Multitudes of well-to-do German citizens dwell there: And in even greater numbers Germans will emigrate, become wealthy, and long for our books." Admittedly the idea would be a gamble; the growing German-American trade, as Reiche pointed out, was primarily in the necessities of life or at least merchandise involving but small risk to speculators. A network of American agents was envisioned, each agent with his own stock of books--a kind of saturation marketing as well as a hedge against possible fraud. Finally, even if everything went smoothly, initial sales might not even cover packing, shipping, storage charges and commissions. To test the feasibility of his plan, Reiche asked all authors connected with the Buchhandlung der Gelehrten to donate ten to twelve copies of their publications and the Buchhandlung would ship them to America. Any profits would be divided among the authors. The invitation was extended to all German publishers and authors who were asked for contributions: "Especially of any out-of-date books no longer very salable in Germany." Reiche concluded resignedly, "if anyone laughs at these ideas, let him laugh! We have been laughed at before."

In August 1784, the Berichte claimed that four large bundles had already been packed and shipped to America, and others

were to follow (Meyer, p. 91). A terse but provocative notice in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (Jena), datelined "Neuyork, d. 31. Merz, 1788" (soon after Reiche's departure from Europe), seems to indicate that some of the books did reach America: "Der ehemalige Buchhandler Magister Reich [e] ist gar nach Amerika gekommen. Er wollte die vor einigen Jahren hereingesandten Bucher gern für Makulatur verkaufen; aber Niemand bot ihm etwas."¹² Reiche had at least one ally--Johann David Schoepf, an acute observer of the American scene whose travels were published in Germany in 1788, who was perhaps familiar with Reiche's proposal and held similar views: "But probably the free and immediate intercourse now begun between the mother country and America will involve a betterment of the language. Since America, in the time of German literature, is 20-40 years behind, it might possibly be a shrewd speculation to let loose from their bookstall prisons all our unread and forgotten poets and prosaists and transport them to America after the manner of the English (at one time) and their jail-birds" (Morrison trans., I, 109-110). Despite the failure of Reiche's scheme, the last decade or so of the eighteenth century did see increased attention paid by German booksellers to the cultivation of the American market (that story is outside the scope of this brief paper).

The details of Reiche's bankruptcy are a mystery, but in 1787 he decided to emigrate to Philadelphia where, according to Kapp and Goldfriedrich, he "ist...im grössten Elend gestorben (III, 173)." From the American point of view there is more to

be said. For one thing, Reiche established a precedent by being the first trained German bookseller to emigrate to the United States.¹³ Secondly, as a writer and journalist, and simply as an educated man of the world, he made a definite contribution to Philadelphia's German culture. His first project, however, showed a great misjudgment of the German-American market. It was to be nothing less than a history of the world in German filling ten to twelve octavo volumes, each of 600 pages!

More than the entire front page of a local German paper¹⁴ was taken up with his prospectus. He began grandly enough: "Deutsche Männer!--You stem from a people with no equal on this earth...the most courageous, most enlightened of all civilized nations." The Germans of America, he wrote, should be aware of their great heritage; without a knowledge of history they would remain ignorant and incapable of participation in government or of even understanding the issues of the day. How can this knowledge be attained? "Where are the schools and universities where German youth, without great expense, can turn for enlightenment? Where are the books written in America or brought from overseas that would educate our German youth? And where is the desire among the Germans here to read such books?" He offered on subscription in Philadelphia and fifteen other Pennsylvania towns: "The history of all known peoples of the world from the most ancient times to the present, with philosophical and political notes on forms of government, religions, laws, rites and customs, on the causes of their flowering and decay. For the use and pleasure of Free Americans of German ancestry, to make them acquainted with the true art of govern-

ment. Carefully prepared and cleansed of all incomprehensible words and insignificant events, written in a style easily understood by all."¹⁵ The response was negative.

A year passed before Reiche again appeared before the public, this time with *Der General-Postbothe an die Deutsche Nation in America*, published twice a week from January 5 to June 29, 1790, with a sample issue dated November 27, 1789. The magazine was printed and probably backed by Melchior Steiner, publisher of the *Correspondenz*. Once more the appeal was to national pride as Reiche called on the Germans to "avoid giving the impression that our Fatherland has sent abroad only porters and drudges."¹⁶ The programs for the *Postbothe* and the world history overlapped, material originally intended for the latter appeared in installments as "Denkwürdigkeiten der Vorwelt." There were some excellent features about the journal: well-written accounts of the French Revolution and its possible effects (Reiche predicted that Germans would now emigrate to France rather than to America);¹⁷ an anti-British article on the price of corn, and an essay in favor of a standing army for the United States. Though often didactic, its coverage of foreign events was very good, a notch above anything else available. With only 350 subscribers as of June it obviously failed to attract sufficient support.

The *Postbothe* was not Reiche's only contribution to German-American journalism; Seidensticker (p. 576-77) is convinced that he was the unnamed editor who took over Melchior Steiner's *Correspondenz* in October, 1790. Its prior level of

excellence may be judged from Schoepf's description:

Melchior Steiner's German establishment (formerly Christoph Sauer's) prints a weekly German newspaper which contains numerous sorrowful examples of the miserably deformed speech of our American fellow-countrymen. This newspaper is chiefly made up of translations from English sheets, but so stiffly done and so anglic as to be mawkish. The two German ministers and Mr. Steiner himself oversee the sheet. If I mistake not, Mr. Kunze alone receives 100 Pd. Pens. Current for his work. "If we wrote in German," say the compilers in excuse, "our American farmers would neither understand it nor read it" (I, 109).

After October, the paper was so altered in style and content, that Steiner christened it the *Neue Philadelphische Correspondenz* and published it twice a week. Foreign news (as in the *Postbothe*) was derived from Continental rather than English sources, and the entire paper was written in a smooth and educated German. For the first time in the history of the German-American press, wrote Seidensticker (p. 577), the modern editorial was employed. He also called it the finest German-American newspaper to date, though its excellence lasted scarcely more than six weeks before returning to its former mediocrity. This squares with Reiche's chronology--the failure of his *Postbothe* at the end of June, 1790, and his death the following December.

A footnote to Reiche's career, was his hopeful entry into the world of Anglo-American letters with a natural history for young people. The book was placed on subscription in the last issue of the *Postbothe* and on sale late November under the title: *Fifteen Discourses on the Marvellous Works in Nature Delivered by a Father to his Children.*¹⁸ Printed testimonials by the astronomer David Rittenhouse and Dr. Benjamin Rush

indicated some entree into American intellectual circles. The latter wrote: "Mr. Reiche having put into my hands the printed sheets of his 'Fifteen Discourses on the Marvellous Works in Nature,' I have read them with great pleasure, and am of the opinion that the work is calculated to beget a grateful admiration of the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Supreme Being, which are manifested in the vegetable and animal creation. I sincerely wish that it may be introduced and read in all the schools in the United States."

The author barely lived to see his first American book in print; but there was little posthumous fame to have regretted. His obituary in the *Neue Philadelphische Correspondenz* (December 17, 1790) was brief:

Last Saturday in this city, Carl Christoph Reiche, Master of Arts, died after a lingering illness which had prevented him for more than six weeks from attending to any of his affairs. He was a man of much learning. The Royal Prussian capital of Berlin was his birthplace, and where he also apparently laid the foundation of his education; he later studied at Halle in Saxony, and came to America about three years ago. He lived to be almost fifty years old, and last Monday, accompanied by a large gathering of mourners, was solemnly buried in the local cemetery.

At Reiche's death, Steiner probably took over the stock of the *Discourses*. It was still being offered for sale in 1792 by Steiner's new partner, Heinrich Kämmerer, and by Thomas Dobson, a Philadelphia publisher known for his interest in German literature.¹⁹ Reiche's last claim to public attention also took place in 1792--the auction of his private library. The *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* for April 4 announced: "The Library of the late Rev. Charles Reiche, will

be sold on Wednesday and Saturday Evenings next, at the sales of Mr. Prichard. The Books are in Greek, Latin, French and German, classical, historical, &c. several very valuable; as will appear by the printed catalogue. April 3d 1792." No copy of the catalogue is extant.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Friedrich Kapp and Johann Goldfriedrich, *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels* (Leipzig: Börsenvereine der deutschen Buchhändler, 1886-1913), III, 151-73. A bibliography of Reiche's own writings may be found in Johann Georg Meusel, *Lexikon der vom Jahre 1750 bis 1800 verstorbenen teutschen Schriftsteller* (1802-16; rpt. Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), XI, 110-11. See also Karl Buchner, *Zur Geschichte des Selbstverlags der Schriftsteller*, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Rickersche Buchhandlung, 1874) and F. Hermann Meyer, "Die genossenschaftlichen und Gelehrten-Buchhandlungen des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels*, II (1874), 68-124.
2. *Berichte der allgemeinen Buchhandlung der Gelehrten* (Dessau), April 1781, pp. 124-24. Henceforth cited as *Berichte*.
3. Reiche was dismissed as pastor of the Pomeranian village of Gartz for similar reasons (ca. 1770?). That apparently ended his clerical career. On the other hand, his personal integrity and honesty were rarely questioned. Kapp and Goldfriedrich, III, 151; *Berichte*, Jan. 1781, p. 145.
4. August Pinloche, *La Réforme de l'Éducation en Allemagne au dixhuitième Siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1889), pp. 149 and 165.
5. Prince Leopold also founded a *Verlagskasse* to finance the publishing of books by deserving authors (loans to be repaid from the author's profits if any). An agreement was signed obligating the *Verlagskasse* to distribute its books only through Reiche's *Buchhandlung*. The *Kasse* backed publication of 129 works including Wieland's *Horazens Briefe* (1782) and Herder's *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* (1782-83). The title page of the latter bore the characteristic notice--"Auf Kosten der Verlags-Kasse, und zu finden in der Buchhandlung der Gelehrten." Financial problems (the *Kasse* was borrowing heavily) and conflicts of interest hastened the failure of both undertakings.
6. August Niemeyer, friend of Goethe and professor at Halle, called it a "windproject...conceived by a madman...who seems to lack any understanding of the book trade" (Buchner, p. 30). Professor Meusel of Erlangen, however, thought the plan "really very well put together and rigorously thought out, only it will not be really understood that one is supposed to have the books printed at one's own cost and risk; and then certainly the booksellers know how to place so many obstructions in the way, that the enterprise must necessarily miscarry" (Kapp and Goldfriedrich, III, 160).

7. Among them C. F. Bahrdr's translation of Juvenal, an engraved portrait of William Tell by Chodowiecki, Reiche's own *Allgemeine synchronistische Weltgeschichte* in six vols., and J. H. Jacobi's translation of Virgil's *Georgics*.

8. Reiche's original plan called for cash sales only. To exist at all, however, the *Buchhandlung* had to comply with standard trade practice and allow purchasers credit for at least one year. An author who had invested in the printing of his own book might not receive any money at all until the year was up.

9. There was a plan for the young J. G. Göschen to take over the *Buchhandlung* and transform it into a regular business, but at the last minute the sale fell through. See George Joachim Göschen, *The Life and Times of Georg Joachim Göschen* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), I, 50-3.

10. May 22, 1783, 325-26. The University of Pennsylvania is referred to in the text. Johann Christoph Kunze (1744-1807) a leading German minister in Philadelphia, was also Professor of Hebrew and Philosophy at the university. The reading habits of the Pennsylvania-German farmers were satirized by many including Johann David Schoepf: "The universal German farmer's library: the Almanack, and Songbook, a small Garden of Habermann, and the Bible. It is in vain to look for other books.... The highest delight of the German countryman in Pennsylvania is--drink." *Travels in the Confederation [1783-1784]*, trans. by A. J. Morrison (1911; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), I, 107, 104.

11. Feb. 5, 1784, 89-95. The following account is based on this text.

12. Quoted in Paul Ben Baginsky, *German Works Relating to America 1493-1800* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1942), p. 118.

13. Granted it is an uneasy precedent since he never plied his trade in Philadelphia; but is chronologically sound and has symbolic importance when we look ahead to the German-American trade in the nineteenth century with its unceasing trans-Atlantic commuting of booksellers, publishers and books. No "professional" German bookseller established himself in America until Johann Georg Ritter arrived in Philadelphia (1824). Until then, the selling of German books had been usually a sideline of merchants, printers, American booksellers or improvising emigrants.

14. *Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz*, Dec. 2, 1788. Hereafter cited as *Correspondenz*. Reiche's name does not appear, but his authorship seems certain. See following discussion of the *General-Postbothe*, and Oswald Seidensticker, "Die deutsch-amerikanische Zeitungspressen während des vorigen Jahrhunderts," *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Magazin*, I (1886-87), 582.

15. This version of the title is taken from the *Correspondenz*, Jan. 6, 1789. It was probably a reworking of Reiche's old six volume world history (see note 7). A similar project was later

realized by the 48'er Gustav Struve--his Weltgeschichte (New York: 1853-54) in six vols.

16. Seidensticker, p. 585.

17. Reiche had a plan to attract half a million Germans to Pennsylvania. His idea was to prepare a brochure of five to six printed sheets giving a glowing description of Pennsylvania, print up an edition of 1000 and, through contracts in Leipzig, distribute them gratis to all the bookdealers attending the Fair. "And so the citizens of Pennsylvania, for only 50 Pounds, would have as many agents in Germany as there are bookdealers, that is over 300." These dealers would then happily sell their gift copies at home creating a further demand, and thousands more would be reprinted. General-Postbothe, Feb. 5, 1790.

18. The title page continues: "Calculated to make mankind feel, in every thing, the very presence of a Supreme Being, and to influence their minds with a permanent delight in, and firm reliance upon, the directions of an almighty, all-good, and all wise Creator, and Governor." By Charles Christopher Reiche, M.A. Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, by James & Johnson...MDCCXCI.

19. Neue Philadelphische Correspondenz, March 6, 1792.

GERMAN-AMERICAN RESEARCH

Dr. Robert E. Cazden is preparing
a social history of the German-
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