What Americans Said About Saxony, And What This Says About Them: Interpreting Travel Writings Of The Ticknors And Other Privileged Americans, 1800-1850

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Saxony became an increasingly popular destination for American travelers. After first examining the forces behind the travel trends in order to provide historical context, this study analyzes American travelers’ perceptions of Saxony as recorded in their travel writings, with particular emphasis on George and Anna Ticknor's journals from Europe. In doing so, it sheds light on aspects of Anglo-American leisure-class identity between 1800 and 1850. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, educated upper-class New Englanders had very little real knowledge of Germany and its people, and their only image of Saxony would likely have been in connection with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. What information these Anglo-Americans did have about the current literature and thought of Germany generally came via English-language magazines, often first published in Britain. But at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, travel to and within Europe began to be attractive, especially as word spread among American elites that Germany offered the best universities in the world. George Ticknor and a handful of other young New England aristocrats studied at Göttingen with such success and fame that it began a snowballing trend of American students flocking to German universities for the next century. Meanwhile, privileged Americans increasingly began to discover the attractions of Germany in other capacities as well, often as a part of a Grand Tour of Europe that served to enhance their status in society. Though Germany initially lagged far behind more familiar destinations like Great Britain, France, and Italy in popularity, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was on the rise as a favorite destination for American travelers. When, in the process of traveling Germany, Americans discovered the small Kingdom of Saxony tucked away into the heart of the German Confederation, it quickly won their praise and by mid-century was becoming a beloved place to visit or even reside. Again, George Ticknor (with his family this time) was at the forefront of this trend, settling in Dresden for half a year in 1835-1836. Welcomed into the highest noble and royal societies of Saxony, the Ticknors (as Boston Brahmin taste-makers) were likely to have been major factors in fanning the flames of later American enthusiasm for Saxony. The perceptions that the Ticknors and other contemporary American travelers revealed about Germany--and Saxony in particular--reflected aspects of their own identities. For example, they admired the Saxon monarch and royal family. When they favorably compared the “liberal” Saxon court with the “despots” of other European countries, this indicated their American republican heritage. On the other hand, when they sided with the “paternally beneficent” government of the Saxon king against the “ingratitude” of the people, they underscored their own patrician background and authoritarian ideals. Meanwhile, they lauded the Saxon educational system and the enlightened state of the general population, showing the importance they placed on public education and responsibility. They raved about the cultural treasures in the museums of Dresden, because they appreciated cultivation, yet had little access to such quality collections in America. Their response to commercial Leipzig was ambivalent, but courtly and refined Dresden appealed to these aristocrats. Believing that the quality of the soil has a strong effect on the quality of a population, they adjusted their impressions of the complex Saxon/Prussian border regions to fit whatever stereotype they wanted to emphasize at the time: that of the enlightened but unjustly persecuted Saxon peasants or that of the miserable degraded Prussian boor. The observations reflected in early nineteenth-century American travel writings reveal that images of the “other” were fluid and depended on the viewer’s own state of mind, background, and value system. In writing about their perceptions of other lands and peoples, these American travelers actually revealed a lot about themselves.
“That Humane and Advanced Civilization”: Interpreting Americans’ Values from Their Praise of Saxony, 1800–1850

Ashley Sides

As travel to Europe became increasingly fashionable and possible for privileged Americans in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the little German Kingdom of Saxony turned into a beloved destination. In other words, these elite Americans loved Saxony because it reminded them of what they valued in their own nation.1 Before exploring these American impressions of Saxony, however, it will be useful to understand the context of American travel to Germany and Europe in general. The Americans in this study are Anglo-Americans, not of German extraction. Ashley Sides

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The end of the Although only a few Americans travel to Britain, almost all have an opinion of the British. Many Americans would have difficulty drawing a map of Britain. They think the country consists of London and a village in Scotland where one of their ancestors came from. London itself is covered in fog. The average British man wears a bowler hat and carries an umbrella. Americans often say that the British are «quaint» a word which means old-fashioned, but in a nice way. This impression comes partly from differences in how the two countries speak English. British English has words and structures that have been used in the US for a long time, and so it sounds old-fashioned or formal. A favorite British adjective is lovely, which is used to describe everything, including the weather. Generally, Americans are fairly ignorant of other cultures. With the exception of one year, my public school history education consisted only of U.S. history. Other countries are usually only taught in that context. We learned about Russia only in the context of the world wars and the cold war. Most of what I have learned about Russia I have learned on my own and from Russian Americans I know. I have even met Americans who still think Russia is Communist. Of all the wonderful Russian writers, many Americans know only of Tolstoy. When Americans think of Russians they may think of: - vodka. - bea