

REVIEW ESSAY:
PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN IMAGES

By Claire Messimer, *Known by the Works of His Hands*. (Kutztown: The Pennsylvania German Society, 2000. Pp. 211, appendices, endnotes, bibliography, index.) Edited by Cory M. Amsler. *Bucks County Fraktur* (Doylestown, PA: The Bucks County Historical Society, 1999. The Pennsylvania German Society vol. XXXIII. Pp. ix, 334, appendix, notes, index.)

The last several years have been especially bountiful for those interested in Pennsylvania German material culture. The last time we experienced such a surge of publication and interest were the years 1976–1983, when the Bicentennial of the United States and Tricentennial of German settlement in Pennsylvania were celebrated. A major exhibition, “The Pennsylvania Germans: A Celebration of Their Arts, 1683–1850” was mounted jointly by The Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Autumn 1982. The accompanying catalog, of the same name, by Beatrice B. Garvin and Charles B.

Hummel set a new standard for the scholarly appreciation of Pennsylvania German artifacts. That same year Beatrice Garvin also published her massive, detailed catalog of the superb collections of Pennsylvania German materials held by The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Over the quieter years since 1983, the Pennsylvania German Society has continued to provide its members with an annual volume (sometimes a year or two late) dealing with a variety of subjects: some like Claire Messimer's *Known by the Works of His Hands* is a society publication. Others like William Woys Weaver's *Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking* were cooperative efforts with commercial or scholarly presses. The Pennsylvania German Society's mission to disseminate information about Pennsylvania culture has been consistent, the quality of their books, however, has not. The Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County in collaboration with Schiffer Publishing, Ltd. sponsored a three volume series of Books on German culture, appearing between 1999 and 2002. These are this reviewer's *Pennsylvania German Arts: More than Hearts, Parrots, and Tulips*, *Menonite Arts*, and Corrine and Russell Earnest's *Fraktur: Folk Art and Family*.

Of the various expressions of Pennsylvania German folk art there is no area that has received greater attention in recent years than fraktur, these distinctive American illuminated manuscripts. There have been numerous exhibitions devoted to the subject. Some have been devoted to institutional collections and have resulted in significant publications like Carol E. Faill's *A Selective Guide to the Franklin and Marshall Fraktur Collection* and Dennis K. Moyers' encyclopedic *Fraktur Writings and Folk Art Drawings of the Schwenkfelder Library Collection*. Other exhibitions have been mounted by county historical societies and are concerned primarily with regional materials. Several of these have also yielded significant publications including June Burk Lloyd's *Faith and Family: Pennsylvania German Heritage in York County Area Fraktur* and one of the subjects of this review, *Bucks County Fraktur* edited by Cory M. Amsler which is the most scholarly and important book in a very impressive group of monographs. Additionally among an assemblage of graphically beautiful publications, it is outstanding. Editor and contributor, Cory M. Amsler and his editorial committee are to be credited with selecting the finest of scholars to provide insightful essays that explore Bucks County Fraktur in a universal, rather than a parochial light.

Of great value is the first essay which is a reprint of Henry C. Mercer's 1897 pioneering essay "The Survival of the Mediaeval Art of Illuminative Writings Among Pennsylvania Germans" which has never been republished since it

appeared in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*. While some of its scholarship is outdated, this essay is a valuable starting place in exploring not only fraktur, but the scholarship of fraktur, as well. Providing contrast to Mercer, and establishing an intellectually satisfying basis for the rest of the book are two essays by the iconic scholar of Pennsylvania German culture, Don Yoder, "The European Background of Pennsylvania's Fraktur Art" and the "The Fraktur Texts and German Spirituality" which carefully trace the roots of American fraktur to Germanic publications and artistic traditions.

The next two essays introduce the Bucks County theme "Bucks County in the Age of Fraktur" by Terry A. McNealy, explores the German influences and crafts in the County in the period 1750 to 1850. One illustration here that is especially interesting, and fresh, is a detail of land draft drawing by Jacob Cassel in New Britain Township in 1828. "This is an example of another purpose" the author notes "to which a Pennsylvania German... could put ink, watercolor and paper." Terry A. McNealy and Cory M. Amsler's "Pennsylvania German Schools in Bucks County" explores German education and the illumination created by both school masters and their students. Again, there are unfamiliar images. A vintage photograph, for example, of the ceiling beams of the Deep Run school in Bedminster Township embellished with "Shape Note Music." Parochial schools were especially important before Pennsylvania's belated adoption of public education.

John Ruth's "Skippack to Tohickon and Beyond: The Extended Community of Buck's County Mennonite Fraktur Artists" and Mary Jane Lederach Hershey's "The Notenbuchlein Tradition in Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Community Schools in an Area Known as the Franconia Conference" are both models of localized scholarship. The Ruth essay deals with an array of Mennonite fraktur produced in a contiguous region centering in Bucks County but also continuing into Montgomery and Berks Counties as well. Excellent maps delineate the area clearly. There are 168 presently Notenbüchlein (manuscript hymn tune booklets) known to survive from the Franconia conference. Appended to this second essay is a list of all of these and a very valuable "Alphabetical Inventory" that provides available biographical information about the makers and original owners of these rare examples of the fraktur makers' art.

Joel D. Aldelfer's "David Kulp, His Hands and Pen, Beet it if You Can': The Bucks County Brown Leaf Artists Identified" is an exemplar of the detailed analysis which has extended our knowledge of fraktur artists over the last 25 or so years as previously anonymous artists whose works were

denominated style (for example "Brown's Leaf") have been identified, and in many cases, become the subject of biography. Michael Bird of the University of Toronto has made a specialty of studying the Pennsylvania German Diaspora into Canada and "Diese Bild gehoret Mir: Transforming Bucks County Fraktur in Canada" is a fine example of his scholarly ability.

Immediately preceding the catalogue of the Bucks County collection is Russell and Corinne Earnest's overview of local artists in "Ausfullers and Dindamen: The Fraktur Scriveners of Bucks County." The Earnests are unique. They devote themselves entirely to the study of fraktur and genealogy and have personally analyzed and recorded data on more than 20,000 fraktur specimens.

Ultimately the *raisonne d'etre* for this volume is the... "Catalog and Guide to the Artists" written by Cory M. Amsler. It is superb in analysis, organization, and writing. This should stand as the definitive study of Bucks County fraktur and artists. It could only be enhanced in the future when more examples of fraktur are found and when the identities of elusive artists are discovered. Enhancing further the book's value is its appendix in which translations of the German texts of all the illustrated works are presented. Most were prepared by Don Yoder.

Often sharing motifs with fraktur are gravestones. For obvious reasons stones are not as avidly collected as fraktur. Nor have they been as fully studied. Scholarly study of tombstones in America begins in New England and the classic book in the field is Allen I. Ludwig's 1966 work *Graven Images: New England Stone Carving and Its Symbols, 1660-1850*. There is no Pennsylvania German equivalent of this work. We do have several good articles on individual stone cutters, most notably William N. Richardson's "The Pennsylvania German Tombstones of Isaac Foust Stiehly (1800-1869)" which was published in the journal of the Northumberland County Historical Society.

Known by the Works of His Hands by Claire Messimer is a welcome contribution to Pennsylvania German gravestone literature in that it identifies "J. B." who signed many tombstones erected in and around Hamlin in Lebanon County as Joseph Brownmiller (1807-1895) a school master turned tombstone cutter. Like many artisans of his era Brownmiller's life is largely undocumented and he is essentially only known by the body of his work which has been ferreted out and amply photographed and recorded by Ms. Messimer. In this book we have the retrieved story of the Brownmillers, a small town German family of churchmen and crafts people that is very important.

The work's value ebbs as it attempts to place J.B.'s work in a national sphere, or even to explain its meaning in the more parochial Pennsylvania German context. While one should "never judge a book by its cover," the volume's dust jacket sets a tone for several of the book's shortfalls. It is a striking color photograph of Pennsylvania German gravestones separated by a lake from a classical rotunda. Nowhere on the book jacket are we told that this is a composite photograph or that the rotunda is in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky!

This is emblematic of the book. In her quiet quest to place "J.B. in the Large Picture," the author appears to be guided more by personal whim than scholarship. Interestingly of twenty color photographs reproduced in the book, only one is a Pennsylvania image, a view of Cedar Hill Cemetery in Fredericksburg. Generally the picture captions are as uninformative as are many of these subjective pictures. A major book on Pennsylvania German tombstones remains to be written.

Over the years the Pennsylvania German Society has published many classics like the widely appealing Amos Long, Jr., book *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm* and the definitive works by specialists like Donald M. Herr's *Pewter in Pennsylvania German Churches*. We expect that the Society will strive in the future to make their publications worthy of joining the best of those from their past.

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