

Germany in the British Consciousness Before 1914

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Introduction: A Celebration of German Culture

1850-1890

In fact, if any one in the present day can be called cultivated who dispenses with a knowledge of German, it is because the two other ·greatest literatures of the world are now impregnated with the results of German labour and German genius.’ – George Eliot

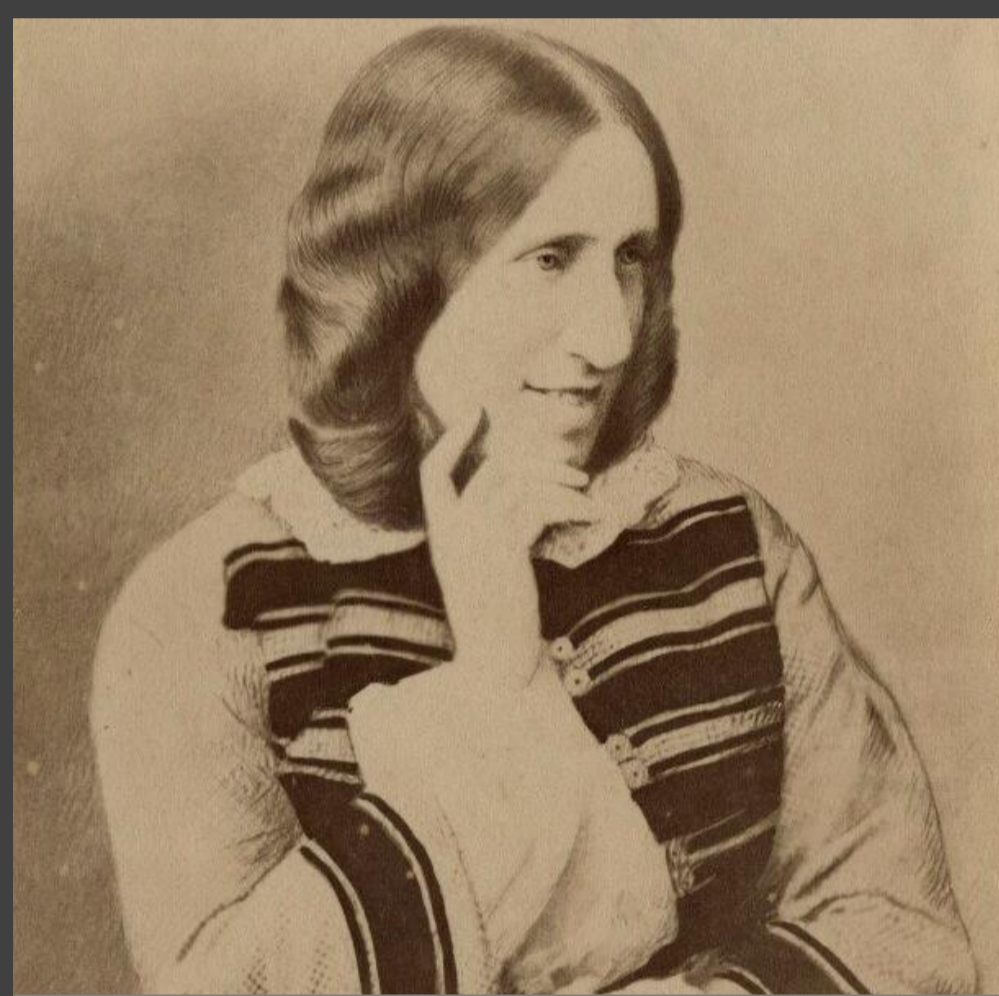


Figure 1: Portrait of George Eliot. London Stereoscopic & Photographic Company, ‘George Eliot’, online image, *The National Portrait Gallery*, 1881, [cited August 3 2022]. Available from National Portrait Gallery Website.

The beginnings of German Studies can be seen in the development of the ‘Medieval and Modern Languages Tripos’ at the University of Cambridge in 1884, which required students to study German language and literature. The increasing interest in German culture, literature and language within Britain in the late 19th Century

demonstrates how the presence of Germany and its contribution to the arts and sciences was beginning to infringe upon the British consciousness during this time. This is evident in the University of Cambridge’s curriculum requiring students to study ‘die Entwicklung des deutschen Schriftums von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart’ (‘the development of German literature from the oldest times to the present’).

Such a mammoth period of German literary history stresses the increasing awareness within Britain of a rich literary legacy in Germany that continues to influence literature across the world. Nathan N. Orgill stresses that there was a sinister edge to this profound admiration of German culture and literature within the mid-1880s, which culminated in a strange suspicion towards German achievement, later developing into perceiving German cultural precedence in Europe at this time as a threat to the centrality of British literature and culture on the global stage.

The Beginnings of Anti-German Sentiment in Britain Post-1890

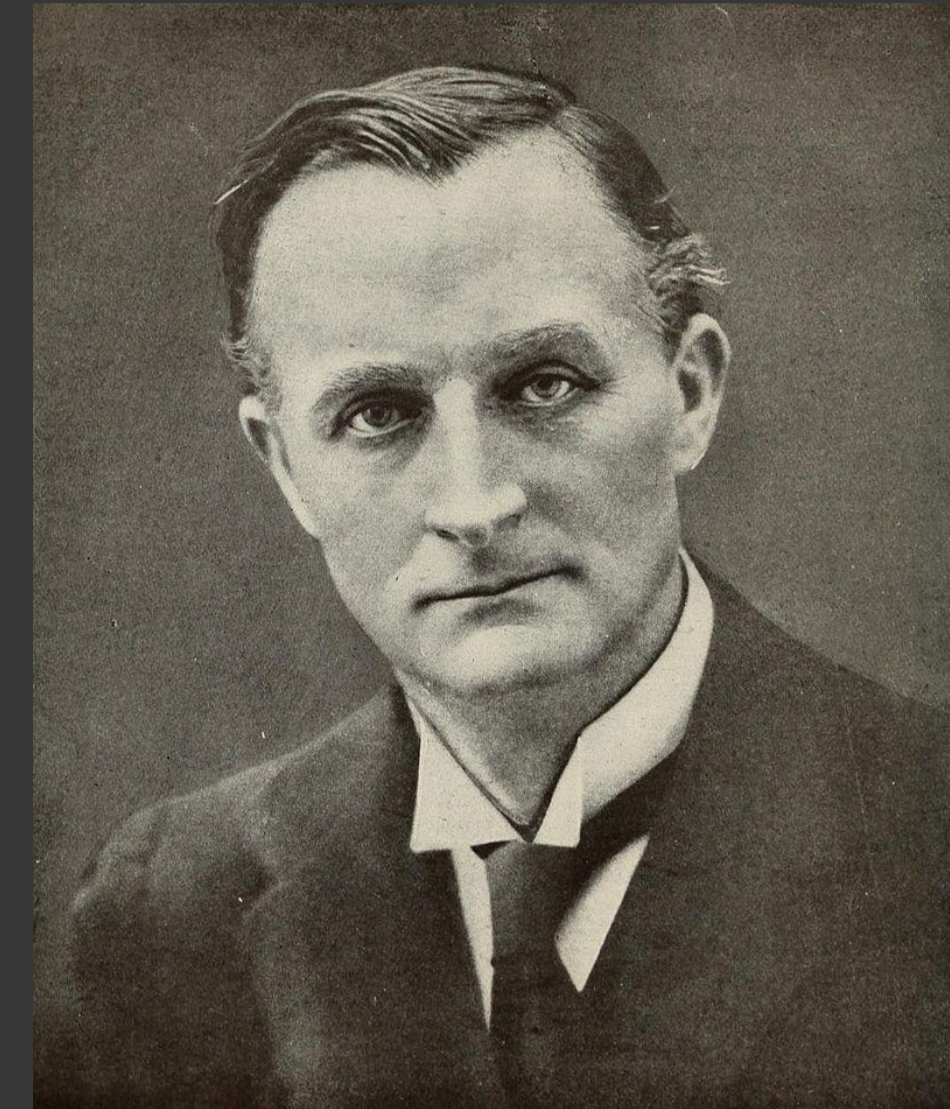


Figure 2: Sir Edward Grey, Viscount of Falloden and later Foreign Secretary of Britain. Image taken from *The World’s Work: Arthur W. Page, The World’s Work* (London: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), p. 161.

The ‘dark and dangerous current’ running between Britain and Germany

Echoing this developing anxiety and increasing watchfulness over German cultural and economic achievement, Sleightholme-Albanis draws attention to a rising scepticism in British political rhetoric towards Germany surfacing in the 1890s. This is evident in Sir Edward Grey (Figure 3), the Viscount of Falloden and later Foreign Secretary of Britain, perceiving a ‘dark and dangerous current’ in German policy from his work in Foreign Office from 1892-1895. Notably, within the same time frame in the 1890s, there is a distinct shift in the proliferation of the study of German within Britain, in which the number of German students at the University of Cambridge has risen to an all-time high and the teaching of German spread to London Universities. This is described in *Die deutsche Kolonie in England*, in which the dissemination of German teaching in the 1890s is distinctly highlighted, as ‘bald begannen auch die andern Universitäten, zunächst London, ihre Lehrpläne und Prüfungsordnungen umzugestalten, wobei meist die in Cambridge gemachten Erfahrungen in Betracht gezogen und teilweise verwendet werden’.

Conclusions: What was the impact of pre-war international relations on the development of German Studies?

The following of Universities in Cambridge’s footsteps in regards to establishing the teaching of German as a discipline throughout Britain demonstrates the increased awareness of the contribution of German culture, language and identity to wider Europe. However, the blackening of political rhetoric towards Germany, as is conveyed by the perception of Germany’s precedence on the world stage as ‘dark’ and ‘dangerous’ emphasises the intimidation of Britain in the face of German success which sets the tone for British-German relations entering the 20th Century, as German cultural domination is perceived as a threat to the status of British culture and identity on the world stage.



Figure 3: Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library, Liddle Collection, LUA/PHC/003/5.