

Gustav Körner Attacks Gottfried Duden in 1834:
Illinois against Missouri?¹

by

Steven W. Rowan, Ph.D.
The University of Missouri – St. Louis

In October 1833, Gustav Körner (1809-96) made a long trek up the Missouri from St. Louis to Jefferson City. Along the way he encountered many disgruntled recent German immigrants. They had flooded into the Missouri valley in response to Gottfried Duden's (1789-1856)² extremely popular book touting Missouri, which had been published in 1829 and subsequently reprinted a number of times:³

Everyone interested in the significant question of emigration sought instruction or confirmation of his views in this book; for many families it was daily reading before carrying out their decision, and it became an unimpeachable authority. Friends and patrons of emigration ordered many thousands of this report to make it easier for those without means to obtain it and to provide instruction on its position and situation.⁴

Körner became convinced that they had been misled:

[M]any [Germans] denounc[ed] Mr. Duden bitterly for his all too rosy and often very inaccurate descriptions of this part of Missouri, and for having caused so many to lose their money, their spirits, and their health by

¹ Paper presented at the 33rd Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, New Ulm, Minnesota, 17 April 2009.

² Dorris Keeven-Franke, of Washington, Missouri, has clarified aspects of Duden's career, adding details hitherto unknown. Most important of these is that Duden first purchased land in the Dutzow area in 1819, a fact overlooked in his various publications. He arrived in Missouri in October, 1824, departing in spring of 1827.

³ The first edition was published in Elberfeld at Duden's expense by Sam. Lucas in 1829, and a revised edition in Bonn "In Commission bei E. Weber," 1834. Two Swiss editions were published in St. Gallen, "In Kommission im Bureau des Freimüthigen," 1832 and 1835. For a translation of Duden's treatment of Missouri, see Gottfried Duden, *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America and a Stay of Several Years Along the Missouri (During the Years 1824, '25, '26, 1827)*, James W. Goodrich, ed., Elsa Nagel *et al.*, tr. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1980), incorporating both major editions.

⁴ Gustav Körner, *Beleuchtung*, 1.

injudicious settlements.⁵

Körner's budding career as a jurist in Frankfurt am Main had suddenly been cut short by his involvement in the disastrous *Wacheputsch* of April 1833, when he and his comrades of the Frankfurt *Burschenschaft* assaulted a central police station in Frankfurt in a futile attempt to spark a general German uprising. As a wounded man with a price on his head and no future in his native country, he joined a party of relatives and acquaintances on their way to the New World. After a disastrous sojourn in St. Louis, where several member of the party died of cholera, he found his refuge in the Engelmann-Hilgard settlement east of Belleville, Illinois. It was from this perch in the relatively healthy Shiloh Valley that he would rebuild his life.

In early winter 1833, he commenced his walking tour with Friedrich Engelmann from St. Louis to the area of Jefferson City. The travelers walked on the southern (right) bank of the Missouri on the way out, and along the northern bank on the way back. It was this tour which gave rise to Körner's biting criticism of Missouri and the image painted of it by Gottfried Duden, whose *Travel Report* of 1829 had drawn many Germans to what they thought was a new Rhineland along the Missouri. Writing his *Illumination* of Duden's *Report* occupied him through the winter of 1833-34, and he published the result through his brother, Karl, back home in Frankfurt.⁶

Körner had rapidly established himself in Belleville, marrying into the Engelmann clan and qualifying as an American lawyer by reading law under A. W. Snyder of Belleville, an established member of the bar. Körner spent the winter of 1836-37

⁵ Thomas J. McCormack, ed., *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner 1809-1896: Life Sketches Written at the Suggestion of his Children*, 2 vols. (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1909), I:314.

⁶ Steven Rowan, "Don't Believe Everything You Read about Missouri," *Der Maibaum*, vol. 16, no. 2 [Fall, 2008], 10-13.

studying at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. He would go on to be one of the most accomplished members of the Illinois Bar, into which he was formally received at what was then the state capital of Vandalia.

The tropes of Körner's legal and political career in Illinois are common knowledge even among novice students of the State's history. The fugitive attorney would eventually be a justice on the Illinois Supreme Court and Lieutenant Governor of Illinois. During the Civil War Körner reached the rank of colonel on the staff of Major General John Charles Frémont during Frémont's brief episode as commander of the Department of the West in St. Louis. The immigrant's role as a friend and advisor to Abraham Lincoln in Lincoln's Illinois years makes Körner's memoirs a very useful resource for Lincoln scholars.⁷

Although he by no means encountered "virgin soil" as an immigrant, Körner identified himself with the earlier wave of German immigrants to the Midwest. One of his most significant publications was a history of German immigration prior to 1848. This was written specifically to counter the often self-absorbed accounts of the "Forty-Eighters," who believed they constituted the whole story of the German-speaking impact on the United States. For his trouble he was often called "Gray Gustav," since to the "Green" Forty-Eighters, the "Thirtyers" were negatively described as the "Grays."⁸

⁷ A rather rare biography of Körner is H. A. Rattermann, *Gustav Körner, Deutsch-amerikanischer Jurist, Staatsmann, Diplomat und Geschichtsschreiber. Ein Lebensbild, nach seiner unveröffentlichten Autobiographie, seinen Schriften und Briefen bearbeitet und dem Andenken des verstorbenen Freundes in dankbarer Erinnerung gewidmet von H. A. Rattermann* (Cincinnati: Verlag des Verfassers, 1902). This is a separate printing from Rattermann's *Gesammelte Werke*, XI:222-386. A copy is in the St. Louis Mercantile Library at The University of Missouri – St. Louis'.

⁸ Gustav Phillip Körner, *Das deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika 1818-1848*, preface by Patricia Herminhouse (New York, Berne, Frankfurt am Main: 1880, reprinted 1986); see also Henry Boernstein, *Memoirs of a Nobody: The Missouri Years of an Austrian Radical*, tr. and ed., Steven Rowan (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997), Introduction, pp. 20-21 and elsewhere in the memoirs themselves.

One artifact of Körner's early career as an Illinois lawyer has seldom been mentioned, let alone read. In 1838 he published in St. Louis a small-format German-language volume of over two hundred pages that was designed to provide settlers with what the extensive title-page declared to be an *Extract from the Laws of the State of Illinois, or a Collection of those Legal Rules that most frequently come to use in Civil Life, Accompanied with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States and of the State of Illinois, as well as with Explanatory Remarks and References for the German Citizens of Illinois, Collected by Gustav Körner, Lawyer*. This came off the press of his fellow former Frankfurt rebel Wilhelm Weber of St. Louis, the editor of the principal German-language newspaper of the day, the *Anzeiger des Westens* ("Western Advertiser"). The *Anzeiger* had been published since 1835.⁹

In 1834, Körner published a 62-page pamphlet whose cover called it *Beleuchtung des Duden'schen Berichtes über die westlichen Staaten Nordamerika's, von Amerika aus, (Illumination of Duden's report on the Western states of North America, as seen from America)*. A title page gave a more thorough treatment of the contents: *Schilderung des gegenwärtigen Zustandes der westlichen Staaten Nordamerika's. Erhaltend: Sitten und Gebräuche der Bewohner und Ansiedler, so wie ihres politischen und gesellschaftlichen Lebens, Beschaffenheit des Clima's, des Grund und Bodens und des Gesundheit-Zustandes, die Lage der Künste und Gewerbe, des Landwirthes oder Farmers, des Handelstreibenden und Gelehrten. Ein Schriftchen für den gebildeten Auswanderer in*

⁹ A short notice on this book will shortly be published in *Der Maibaum*, the bulletin of the Deutschheim Verein of Hermann, Missouri. *Auszug aus Gesetzen des Staates Illinois oder Sammlung derjenigen Rechtsvorschriften, die im bürgerlichen Leben am häufigsten zur Anwendung kommen, begleitet von der Unabhängigkeits-Erklärung und der Constitution der Ver. Staaten und des Staates Illinois, so wie von erleuternden Bemerkungen und Hinweisungen für die deutschen Bürger von Illinois zusammengestellt von Gustav Körner Rechtsanwalt. St. Louis, Druck und Verlag von Wilhelm Weber. 1838.* A copy is found in the Special Collections of the Harvard Law School Library.

einer vollständigen Beleuchtung von Duden's Bericht über eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten Nord-Amerikas. Von Gustav Körner im Illinois-Staat [Portrayal of the current Condition of the Western States of North America. Containing: Customs and Usages of the residents and settlers, as well as their political and social lives, effects of climate, of the ground and soil and of the state of health, the situation of arts and crafts, of the agriculturist or farmer, of those in trade and of scholars. A Little Writing for the educated emigrant in a complete illumination of Duden's Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America. By Gustav Körner in the State of Illinois.] Gustav Körner published this through his brother Karl Körner in Frankfurt am Main.¹⁰

Duden had enthusiastically praised the climate, soil, and opportunities to be found for German immigrants to the Missouri valley. His period of residency in the 1820s in the area of Dutzow, Missouri, was described in glowing terms, portraying the region as healthful, fruitful and hospitable. With some added caveats, this would be the central theme both of his first edition of 1829 and of his second edition in 1832. The ideological basis of his support for German emigration was front and center in a subsequent collection of “excerpts” from his diary of his American sojourn entitled *Europa und Deutschland von Nordamerika aus betrachtet, oder, die Europäische Entwicklung [sic] im 19ten Jahrhundert in Bezug auf die Lage der Deutschen, nach einer Prüfung im innern Nordamerika [Europe and Germany viewed from North America, or European Development in the Nineteenth Century with Reference to the Position of the Germans,*

¹⁰ A copy of Körner's German-language pamphlet *Beleuchtung* is preserved in the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The same pamphlet is posted as a Google book from the University of Michigan Library with the variant title added. It has seldom been mentioned in scholarly literature: see Jessie J. Kile, “Duden and his Critics,” *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Society, 1916), 63-70, for a treatment of Körner's pamphlet. Available through Google Books, <<http://books.google.com>>.

after a testing in interior North America] published in two thick volumes in 1833 and 1835. Körner does not make any reference to the first volume of *Europa und Deutschland*, but it confirms the political and ideological position Duden had already inferred in his *Travel Report*.

I have always seen Duden's work as the precise opposite in attitude to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805-1859) aristocratic analysis in his *Democracy in America*, the first two volumes of which was published in French in 1835. Duden would actually write a short book in 1838 specifically criticizing Tocqueville's elitist vision of both America and of the tendencies of democracy. Duden loved America and the rough-and-tumble life of the American West. Even in his most severe criticism of Duden, Körner praised Duden for his sunny nature, seeing more virtue than evil in the world around him.

Körner's pamphlet begins with a hatchet job on Missouri weather, hills and soils. The severe heat of the summers bore no relationship to the climate Germans were used to in their homeland. The vast Mississippi-Missouri plain was marked with occasional low hills, not Alpine mountains. Some parts of Missouri resembled the unspectacular flatlands of Mecklenburg and Holstein.¹¹ Germans encountered grassy plains in much of the Midwest, not the fully-developed oak and fir forests found in Central Europe. Winds were intense, storms cataclysmic, and winters often severe to the point of freezing over great rivers. "It is this rapid shifting from heat to cold and back again that constitutes the *universal* complaint of every European in these lands."

The soils varied dramatically in quality as well, with the only really good soil being "bottom land," which was extremely unhealthy to work due to mosquito-borne diseases (he actually blamed it on exhalations of bad air from rotting vegetation). Illness

¹¹ *Beleuchtung*, 14.

abounded among immigrants, with cholera in the cities and yellow fever in the hollows of the countryside. “West of the Mississippi, cholera raged not just in large places but also in the countryside.”¹² No experience in Germany could prepare the immigrant for the mosquitoes that assaulted him along the rivers.¹³ “*Except for a few favored spots, the new arrival must figure at least on enduring attacks of the prevailing illnesses.*”¹⁴

The contrast between the hills and the fertile bottomlands was one not only of vegetation but healthfulness:

It is truly a surprise for the wanderer to descend from the heights to the bottoms. An endlessly-dense vegetation, differing from that on higher ground, surrounds the walker. Thousands of vines, providing a picturesque view, block his steps, and a numberless mass of downed trees alters his path with every moment. But there is also a stunning, nerve-assaulting mist that rises to greet him, imparting the desire to flee the charms of this environment swiftly.¹⁵

Duden had said that a German immigrant could set to work to build a prosperous farm from scratch immediately on arrival in the New World. Körner pointed out that the American frontier settler was a breed apart, happy with little and able to thrive in a world of isolation and danger. Germans, on the other hand, were used to the solid comfort of peasant houses that could shelter them in a relatively mild climate. Help was hard to come by, and in desperation Germans were sometimes forced to compromise their ideals and buy slaves, who were by no means cheap (normally five hundred dollars each) and entailed an inhumane form of management that would appall most immigrants.

Running through this negative treatment were some strands of positive advice for immigrants to America: come with lots of money, expect to be have to live for two years

¹² *Beleuchtung*, 23.

¹³ *Beleuchtung*, 41.

¹⁴ *Beleuchtung*, 27, stress in the original.

¹⁵ *Beleuchtung*, 25.

before an adequate harvest, buy an existing farm rather than create one from raw land. Also, Körner advised the immigrant to move to Illinois or one of the other free states rather than to Missouri or Arkansas: slavery was a divisive issue that tainted public discourse on both sides of the frontier between Free States and Slave States, and it would ultimately be resolved only by a terrible civil war.¹⁶ A resident of Belleville, beyond the bluffs above the Mississippi River, Körner saw his part of Illinois as healthier for farmers and more tolerant of the sensitivities of Germans. Even a freethinking German Missourian, he further pointed out, could expect his children to “go native” and become as coarse as the Southerners among whom they settled.

This little pamphlet is both a useful corrective to Duden’s optimistic promotion of Missouri as the “American Rhineland” and a good introduction to Gustav Körner’s rather severe personality. Duden had already been beset by critics for his sunny portrayal of the wrenching experience of emigration, and he had first sought to respond in a second edition of the *Travel Report* in 1834. The additional sections and annotations had the effect of turning his whole narrative into a pedant’s labyrinth.

Duden responded in a general way to Körner’s criticism in the second volume of his vast, and largely unread, *Europa und Deutschland von Amerika aus betrachtet* in 1835. This at least purports to be extracts from Duden’s diary composed while he was on his visit to America in the later 1820s, but it consists largely of historical musings and theoretical speculations.

A more pointed response to all of the criticisms directed against him would come in 1837, when Duden published an intense polemic against all critics of his *Travel Report*, framed as “Duden’s Confession concerning his American *Travel Report*, as a

¹⁶ *Beleuchtung*, 57.

Warning against further frivolous Emigration openly declared,” that stated that he had in fact spoken often of the need for caution and good sense in emigration. This was appended to his critique of Tocqueville, and has shared with that critique an almost total obscurity. Duden proclaimed himself not worthy of rebuke simply because idiots had read his book and thought they had understood it. He went on to acknowledge that the anger of his enemies both in Germany and in America had expressed itself in death-threats and abuse in speech and writing. A note of self-pity crept into Duden’s descriptions of his unpleasant experiences meeting his critics face to face in debates arranged in German taverns, where he was subjected to scathing attacks. This was probably one reason he never fulfilled his repeated promise to return to America and resume his life among the settlers of Dutzow on the northern shore of the Missouri.¹⁷

As already mentioned, the “Confession” was appended to a complex attack on the first half of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), along with a briefer critique of Michel Chevalier’s *Letters on North America* (1837).¹⁸ This has led it to be overlooked by those interested in Duden’s treatment of Missouri. But the attack on Tocqueville’s much more famous *Democracy in America* does provide us with a pointed account of Duden’s core beliefs on the role of the state, of individual life, and of the nature of a democratic society. He specifically denied the validity of higher goals for states, which provided intellectuals with the means to create problems for ordinary people leading ordinary lives. His love of the “instinctual” man over the “reflective” man even

¹⁷ Duden’s “Selbstanklage” is on pp. 84-104 of his *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie* (see the next note).

¹⁸ *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie und das v[on] Tocqueville’sche Werk darüber, als Zeichen des Zustandes der theoretischen Politik Nebst einer Aeusserung über Chevalier’s nordamerikanischer Briefe, insbesondere hinsichtlich der wahren Ursachen des Bankstretes und der neuesten Unfälle in dem Handelsleben von Gottfried Duden. Duden’s Selbst-Anklage wegen seines amerikanischen Reiseberichtes, zur Warnung vor ferneren leichtsinnigen Auswandern. Bonn, bei Eduard Weber 1837.* The copy from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign is posted on the internet as <http://www.archive.org/details/dienordamerikani00dude>.

led him to defend the “healthy common sense” expressed in lynch justice on the American frontier:

And one should not be misled either by the complaints of individual politicians and journalists, nor by sentimental declamations on rawness and anarchy. Every perceptive reader will find it understandable that there is no lack of exceptions, and that now and then the impulses of the moment lead to disruptions of legal process, but he will give the cry raised about this no more room than it deserves. Particularly the procedures of what is called lynch law should not be taken as a naked atrocity of a raw mob. There certainly are acts of lawlessness. But one should not believe for that reason that it strikes those not guilty. In most cases lawful institutions do not provide effective protection against criminals, and the peril of threatened families compels them to self-help, which they practice with as much care and formality as the conditions permit, and certainly more conscientiously than many European military tribunals are seen to proceed.¹⁹

And yet Duden’s sympathy for the good sense of “the people,” whether individuals making decisions for their own lives or in an “instinctual” mass, did not extend to revolutions done on behalf of the people by those who claimed to lead them in the French Revolution.

To be sure this has proceeded in the worst way in France, insofar as they have not only obliterated communal liberty, but also bound individual life with fetters that could not have been done by the most officious theocracy, and all of that at a time it said was accomplishing the most perfect freedom by beheading the most philanthropic of kings and promulgating the rule of the people.²⁰

Duden also explicitly outlined his own support for what he describes as paternal treatment of slaves, hoping to answer what he thought were the extreme and destructive arguments of abolitionists. Duden had been severely criticized for his cool, seemingly neutral treatment of slavery. He had recommended that Germans settle on the heights and use slaves to work in the lowlands, made dangerous to whites by disease. As a result

¹⁹ Duden, *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie*, 42. A transcription of the Fraktur original and an English translation is expected to be published in the *Yearbook of German-American Studies*.

²⁰ Duden, *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie*, 39, note.

he set about discussing the matter aware that there would be strong moral objections:

Now about slavery. In my *Travel Report* I portrayed slavery as an evil that could not be extirpated immediately without the knife of a revolution, and I expressed the desire for its *gradual* extirpation. For that I have received the reputation that I defend slavery. What will the same critics say about my present statement! Since the publication of my *Report*, then, one has begun to deal with this circumstance in America with a similar fanaticism, so that it almost seems to imperil the existence of the Union. As a result I also have been spurred to a new consideration whose result I present here to the public.²¹

He proceeded to argue that only a madman or a fool would promote immediate liberation of the slaves, since this would create an alienated class in the midst of a country that did not have it before. Further, he saw a malign agenda hidden behind the façade of abolition:

Instead of concentrating on radical experiments that always deal with externalities without altering inner dispositions, all philanthropic effort should, for that reason, aim at ennobling white lords and their *treatment* of slaves. To bring the relationship of masters to their slaves closer to a true *patronage* can only be the reasonable striving of those who want to be decent to both sides. Only no one is less capable for this than the *ordinary* agitators against slavery, who can understand nothing more than to produce situations such as in Domingo [Haiti], and after they have accomplished the political emancipation of *women*, come at last to demand the liberation of babies (since the liberation of youth has long since taken place).²²

In the end, Duden confirmed with his own pen in 1837 almost every characteristic that Körner had condemned in his brief pamphlet of 1834. Historic preservationists in southern Illinois are currently working to restore Körner's home as a place where visitors can get to know one of the most significant German-Americans of his day and one of Lincoln's closest friends. See: www.gustavekoerner.org/ for the project to restore the Körner home in Belleville, Illinois.

²¹ Duden, *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie*, 61.

²² Duden, *Die nordamerikanische Demokratie*, 66.