



German History in Documents and Images

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Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl on Novels about Peasants and Real Peasants (1851)

In the following excerpt, folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1832-1897) observes a conspicuous preoccupation with peasants in recent novels and asks whether bourgeois writers from educated circles were in any position to accurately describe the culture and lifestyle of rural peasants. Like Gustav Freytag, who insisted on firsthand observation, Riehl takes issue with the proliferation of sentimental and romanticized accounts of life in the countryside.

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The German peasant has recently become a fashionable item in *belles-lettres*. Two things might be concluded from this. A sense of the importance of future political power often announced itself prophetically in literature, before practical statesmen understood its value. One could say that peasants are now knocking on the doors of novels and village stories because the time is approaching when the full weight of their political influence will make itself felt in reality. On the other hand, one could conclude that the gulf dividing the educated classes from the peasantry must have assumed massive proportions if the unique features of peasant life appear so strangely new that they are used to spice up an already over-seasoned literature. In these village stories (and I include here Berthold Auerbach's), there is a fundamentally false understanding of peasants' emotional life. A peasant is worlds away from every sort of modern sentimentality and Romanticism. He is made of material much too rough for that; in affairs of the heart he is often quite crude. Family is sacred to the peasant, but one searches in vain to find among the peasantry the sort of delicate love for parents, siblings, and between spouses that we take for granted in the educated classes. Sadly, in the country it is all too rational that, for example, grown children are often impious towards their aging parents, namely when parents reach the age at which they turn over all of their possessions to their children in exchange for the duty of "upkeep," which means care and feeding until death. The reality of this "upkeep" is expressed by the saying, "Better not to get undressed until you are ready to go to sleep." This impiety arises more from emotional simplicity than from decayed morals.

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Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft [Civil Society]*. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1851, pp. 51-52.

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