

Johann Georg Kohl Among the Ojibwa Indians of Lake Superior¹

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The windy shores of Lake Superior probably seemed like another world to the German writer Johann Georg Kohl when in the summer of 1855 he visited the Ojibwa Indians in northern Wisconsin.² Who was Kohl, why was he in America, what was the importance of his visit and what was his interest in the American Indians? Born in 1808 in Bremen, the eldest of twelve children, Kohl attended universities in Göttingen, Heidelberg and Munich. Unfortunately, he had to leave the latter university when his father, a wine merchant, died in 1830. With little financial support, Kohl moved to Latvia to assume the task of tutor and then, a few years later, moved to St. Petersburg again working as a tutor. In St. Petersburg, he became interested in the effects of topography and geography on migration and trade. Giving up his position as tutor, Kohl remained in Russia collecting maps, traveling and writing on the geography and rivers of that country. In 1839 Kohl returned to Germany and although Dresden served as his official address, he more often could be found traveling around Europe. His works on Russia were published in Germany and became “best sellers” and were translated into multiple languages. They established him as an important travel writer. Subsequent

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International and Interdisciplinary Alexander von Humboldt Conference, Berlin, July 2009.

² Some of this essay is drawn from my “Introduction” to Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. Lascelles Wraxall. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985. xiii–xxxix.

travel books that he wrote, including works on Austria and Scotland, were received favorably and established him as an important travel writer.³

Economic developments in Germany partially account for the popularity of Kohl's cultural travel works. Steam boats began plying German rivers after 1805 giving rise to increased public travel. After 1835, river travel had to compete with the emergence of railroads which by 1848 radiated from several regional centers and a network of new hard-surfaced roads resulting in an even greater volume of traffic. Germany was not alone in this travel revolution. Other countries, such as France and the Netherlands also moved to improve their transportation systems.⁴ Hence, books on cultural geography became popular.

Sometime around mid-century, Kohl developed an interest in America and set about, drawing on his large collection of early maps on America, to write on its founding. Kohl thought his study would be improved by a trip to America; but what drew him to this study? There were many influences but it is difficult to say which one proved the most important. His father had often mentioned America as a land of opportunity, a land of new beginnings. One of Kohl's younger brothers had already emigrated to Canada. Germans who had emigrated to America sent news of the great political experiment that the United States had embarked upon and urged emigration to this new world. Books describing the American land and people were eagerly sought in Germany at mid-century. Some works, like those of Gottfried Duden and Francis Joseph Grund, were written to actually encourage emigration and the formation of colonies to settle the frontier in the Mississippi Valley and Texas. Although some Germans were repelled by the stories decrying the lack of culture or ideals in the new nation, many others, attracted by the reports of freedom and opportunity, crossed the Atlantic and embarked on a new life in the new land. German immigrants to the United States numbered in the thousands each year from the 1830s to the mid-1850s, when emigration peaked.⁵

³ W. Wolkenhauer, "J. G. Kohl, *Aus allen Weltteilen*.10 (1879): 138–41; Johann G. Kohl "Lebensbeschreibung, 1859," MS, AUT XX, 1,2,5,6, Kohl Collection (Kohl, Literarischer Nachlass), Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Bremen; Robert E. Bieder, "Introduction." in Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*; xvii."

⁴ Hajo Holborn. *A History of Modern Germany, 1840–1945*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1969. 10–12.

⁵ J. G. Kohl to Adolph Kohl, 27 September 1854, AUT xviii/17 Briefe aus Amerika, Kohl Collection; Paul C. Weber. *America in Imaginative German Literature in the*

Another factor that must have influenced Kohl's interest in America was the social, economic and political uneasiness in Germany. As one historian noted, "unemployment, scarcity, and misery were great in the Prussian towns and cities, as elsewhere in Germany when the year 1848 began." Still a country of separate states and principalities, Germany was in the throes of a structural transition to modernism;—on the one hand, it was battered by the demands of the liberals for political changes including calls for a free press, trial by jury, state constitutions and a national assembly and on the other hand, by conservatives who sought to retain the old system of local Junker rule.⁶ All these forces prompted the revolution of 1848–49. The parliament that met in Frankfurt in 1848, to address the rising discontent in Germany failed and with this failure intensified the frustration throughout much of the general population. Whether or not this political collapse led to an increase in German emigration to the United States after 1850 is difficult to say, but after the failed revolution emigration increased dramatically.⁷

Kohl stood witness to the whirligig of discontent that gripped Prussia and the rest of Germany in these years. In 1849 Kohl wrote, "In the chilling context of the political atmosphere one hears of a new world, of a distant place, of a country of the future, and always one thinks here of America. 'The train of world history goes west' is being proclaimed. ... Everywhere I find a new element, hitherto unknown to me, which I can only name the American element."⁸ Kohl's friends also reflected this pro-American stance. One, Karl Andree, who had studied ethnology and geography under the famed ethnographer-geographer Carl Ritter at the

First Half of the Nineteenth Century, Columbia University Germanic Studies 26 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926) 2–10, 13, 14, 107, 117–19, 198–99, 235–66; 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, and 1827."* ed. James W. Goodrich. trans. George H. Kellner. et al. Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri and University of Missouri Press, 1980, especially Goodrich's introduction, vii–xxiv; Francis Joseph Grund. *The Americans in the Moral, Social and Political Relations*. Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1837; on German emigration, see Leo Schelbert, "Emigration from Imperial Germany Overseas, 1871–1914: Contours, Contexts, Experiences." *Imperial Germany*, ed. Volker Durr, et al. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. 112–133.

⁶ Holborn. 48.

⁷ Holborn. 5–58, 122–123.

⁸ Hermann A. Schumacher. "Kohl Amerikanische Studien." *Deutsche Geographische Blätter*. 11. April 1888. 110.

University of Berlin, strongly supported Kohl in his American studies and spoke of the “flight of history westward.” Another of Kohl’s friends, Arnold Duckwitz, a senator from the state of Bremen, also urged Kohl to make the trip to America.⁹

During the winter of 1850–51, Kohl worked on his American project in Dresden. He read extensively probably drawing on the travel accounts of Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied and also those of Duke Paul Wilhelm of Württemberg describing the Indians of the upper Missouri and the ethnological novels of Charles Sealfield (Karl Postl) and Friedrich Gerstaecker on American Indian life. It is probable that he also studied the travel account of Alexander von Humboldt among the Indians of South America. We know his reading included the works of American writers: Washington Irving, William Prescott, George Bancroft and ethnologists Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Lewis Henry Morgan.¹⁰

In 1854, Kohl decided to make the trip to America. He solicited letters of introduction from ethnologist Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt. Before leaving for America, Kohl presented a lecture before the Berlin Geographical Society on his American research. On his way to America, Kohl stopped off in Paris and presented von Humboldt’s letter of introduction to the famous geographer E. François Jomard and to the Geographical Society of Paris. After presenting a paper at the Paris society, Kohl headed to England to pursue map research at the Admiralty, the British Museum and the Hudson Bay Company archives. In Oxford, he also looked at the map collection of Thomas Bodley and then on September 7, 1854 departed for America.¹¹

Back in New York, after a short trip to Canada, he began his map research in earnest. He enjoyed the opportunities the city offered: meeting with important scholars, contacts with publishers and giving lectures before the New-York Historical Society and the New-York Geographical Society. Through members of the latter society, Kohl gained introductions to writer Washington Irving, ethnologist Henry R. Schoolcraft and poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Kohl’s reputation as a scholar of

⁹ Anneli Alexander. “J. G. Kohl und seine Bedeutung für die deutsche Landes—und Völkerforschung. *Deutsche Geographische Blätter*. 1940. 21; Schumacher. “Kohl’s Americanische Studien.” 112.

¹⁰ Schumacher. “Kohl’s Americanische Studien.” 117.

¹¹ Johann Georg Kohl. “Lebensbeschreibung, 1859,” MS, AUT xx. 110. Kohl Collection; Alexander. “J. G. Kohl”. 112.

American geography traveled quickly. On a trip to Washington in 1855, Kohl met Alexander Dallas Bache of the United States Coastal Survey. So impressed was Bache of Kohl's knowledge of cartography and his collection of maps and documents on America that he hired Kohl to make a survey of America's coasts. Also in 1855, Kohl accepted an offer from the publisher D. Appleton to write a book on the Upper Mississippi Valley.¹²

Lacking empirical knowledge of that part of the United States, Kohl planned a three month trip to the Upper Mississippi. When he heard that the United States government planned to make its yearly payment to the Indian tribes of the upper Midwest in the summer of 1855, he decided this would be a fine opportunity to see both the Indians and that part of the country. In Germany, Kohl's attitude about Indians was rather negative but in America he altered his view. Kohl became fascinated observing the Lakota, or Sioux, and the Ojibwa peoples and their customs and what started as a three month trip was extended to six.

The Ojibwa, also known as Ojibway, Chippewa or Anishinaabe, are an Algonquian speaking people who once ranged over parts of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and in Canada, parts of Ontario and Manitoba. They lived in small patrilineal bands numbering twenty or thirty individuals all related to each other. In summer these bands congregated at noted fishing sites that included Sault Ste. Marie (Michigan and Ontario), Green Bay (Wisconsin) and Georgian Bay (Ontario). In the autumn, the bands would leave these fishing sites and return to the interior or woods, each family in its own canoe, to hunt and trap throughout the winter. Survival over the harsh winter months depended on hunting and so each band claimed extensive territorial rights including the animals that inhabited the areas. Starvation, however, always lurked as a possibility.¹³

By the time Kohl arrived among the Ojibwa, many had been placed on reservations, land set aside for them by the federal government, in northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Ontario. A year later, 1856 and for the next decade, more Ojibwa would be placed on reservations in

¹² Bieder. "Introduction." xxiii-xxiv.

¹³ Robert E. Bieder. *Native American Communities in Wisconsin, 1600-1960: A Study of Tradition and Change*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. 30-37.

Minnesota.¹⁴ As Kohl noted, the Ojibwa on their new reservations attempted to maintain the “old ways,” living in round or oblong bark wigwams, performing their old ceremonies and dances and making items like baskets, canoes, snow-shoes and clothing.¹⁵

The question remains, however, why would this educated urbane German want to spend weeks among mostly Ojibwa Indians in the wilderness of northern Wisconsin and Michigan? As a travel writer, Kohl undoubtedly knew of the German market for books about American Indian cultures.¹⁶ His planned work on America may also have motivated him but these are only conjectures. Kohl was a student of the interrelationship of culture and geography. Intrigued by the ethnological questions that Indians and mixed-bloods (people of Indian and Caucasian descent) posed, he probably saw his trip to the North as an opportunity to test assumptions and verify in person what he had read and heard about these peoples. On his trip among the Ojibwa he set out to gather his own data. From long experience as a travel writer, Kohl firmly believed in the need to observe people before writing about them. As Kohl explained, “For an observer [actually living among the Ojibwa] was naturally the best opportunity [that] could [be desired] to regard more closely these curious American aborigines and collect information as to their traditions and customs.”¹⁷

Besides recording instances of Ojibwa material culture—at one point he actually had an Ojibwa woman build him a wigwam in the village so that he could live in their midst—Kohl explored their religion, ecology and language.¹⁸ For Kohl, these aspects of culture were sources that proved their humanity and similarity to other peoples and especially

¹⁴ Helen Hornbeck Tanner, ed. *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. 164–165.

¹⁵ Kohl. *Kitchi-Gami*.

¹⁶ On the German market for books on Indians, see: Paul C. Weber. *America in Imaginative German Literature in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Columbia University Germanic Studies. 26. New York: Columbia University Press, 1926. chaps. 3 and 4; Ray A. Billington. *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Images of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1981. chap. 3.

¹⁷ Johann Geog Kohl. *Travels in Canada, and Through the States of New York and Pennsylvania*. Vol.1. trans. Mrs. Percy Sinnett. London: George Manwaring, 1864. 227; Schumacher. “Kohls Amerikanische Studien.” 148; Bieder. “Introduction.” xxvii.

¹⁸ Kohl. *Kitchi-Gami*. 3–4.

Europeans. Other writers had also noticed these aspects of culture but only to use such information to exemplify Ojibwa primitiveness and paganism and buttress support for the government's civilization policy.

Kohl's attitudes and contribution to North American ethnology are better appreciated when compared with works of contemporary "ethnologists" then writing on the Ojibwa. The Territorial Governor of Michigan, Lewis Cass, engaged in what I have previously called "frontier ethnology," that is, an ethnology directed to destroy Ojibwa culture and force civilization upon them was one such ethnologist.¹⁹ To Cass, Indians seemed to lack those mental traits Caucasians found vital in constructing their civilization. According to Cass, Indians acted more from impulse than from reason. The Indian mind had to be altered before they could be civilized.²⁰ Cass's protégée, Schoolcraft also wrote extensively on the Ojibwa. As an Indian agent in Michigan, Schoolcraft had better access to the Ojibwa than Cass. Schoolcraft dealt with the Ojibwa daily but his greatest source of information came from his wife, a mixed-blood Ojibwa, and her brother George Johnston. Both were greatly exploited by Schoolcraft and given little recognition. Schoolcraft also tended to serve up his ethnology with a large dose of strict Presbyterianism claiming that Indians must experience a change of heart through the acceptance of Christianity before they would forsake their "savagery."²¹ Schoolcraft believed that Indians could not think abstractly and so instilling Christian beliefs and values would be extremely difficult.

Schoolcraft viewed Indians in moralistic terms and as children who needed to be led. According to Schoolcraft, the Indians' dark and gloomy future was compounded by their inability to cope with change. Their lack of progress lay not in their economic insufficiency but in their moral degeneracy.²² Schoolcraft saw himself as their spiritual advisor and his "ethnology" was a argument for forced acculturation.²³

¹⁹ Robert E. Bieder. *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. 152; Bieder. "Introduction." xxix.

²⁰ Bieder. *Science Encounters the Indian*. 153-154. Bieder. "Introduction." xxix.

²¹ Bieder. *Science Encounters the Indian*. 166-167.

²² Bieder. *Science Encounters the Indian*. 162.

²³ For a more extensive discussion of Schoolcraft's ethnology, see my chapter 3. "Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and the Ethnologist as Historian and Moralizer," *Science Encounters the Indian*.

Kohl's work differed from American ethnology partly because he drew upon a different ethnological tradition. Kohl inherited a German tradition of travel ethnography, the practice of keeping a travel journal that described people, places, and traditions. Around 1800 this tradition began to change moving from merely recording what was seen to interpreting what was seen.²⁴ Kohl interpreted and compared.

Kohl's ethnology differed in yet other ways. His description of Ojibwa culture is in sharp contrast from that of the Americans, not because Kohl asked better questions than Schoolcraft and all the others, but because his concerns were different. Unhampered by the American preoccupation with converting Indian people to Christianity, nor seeking their removal from tribal lands, nor their forced acculturation, Kohl's objective was to produce an ethnological account of a rich and unique culture at a particular time and place. He wrote elegantly on how the Ojibwa lived; the foods they ate; the clothes they wore; how they painted their faces; their forms of "writing;" their methods and implements used in travel, hunting, and fishing. Kohl was able to peel back layers of Ojibwa culture to discover the "language" of the culture. He was sensitive to nuances within Ojibwa culture such as in face painting and in differences in life-styles between the Ojibwa who lived near Lake Superior and those who lived further inland. Because of his interest in the relationship between culture and geography, Kohl also gave greater attention to environmental and geographical aspects of culture change and development than did American works.

Kohl even foreshadowed later anthropologists and ethnologists regarding similar behavior among distant peoples when, in reply to those who claimed that Indian customs proved they were descended from the lost ten tribes of Israel, he insisted that such customs "are ... no more than the resemblances they bear to all other peoples that live in a similar nomadic state."²⁵ Americans saw Indians as different and sought to force them to change through restructuring their environments and their cultures. Kohl endeavored to represent them as they were in order to

²⁴ Justin Stagl. "Der wohl unterwiesne Passagier: Reisekunst und Gesellschaftsbeschreibung vom 16. bis zum 18 Jahrhundert." in *Reisen und Reisebeschreibungen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert als Quellen der Kulturebeziehungsforchung*, eds. B. I. Krasnobaev et al. Berlin: 353-84.

²⁵ Kohl. *Kitchi-Gami*. 134.

enable understanding; to see them as different from Europeans but also as similar.²⁶

When Kohl returned to Germany, he gathered his notes on his adventure in the Lake Superior wilderness and his life among the Ojibwa. As Kohl's biographer claims, the trip from the Mississippi Valley, north to Lake Superior, along the southern shore of the lake from Wisconsin to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan and Canada was the highpoint of Kohl's travels in America and yielded the most result for ethnology.²⁷ The notes Kohl took on his trip among the Ojibwa would become his two volume work *Kitchi-Gami. oder, Erzählungen vom Obern See: Ein Beitrag zur Charakteristik der Amerikanischen Indianer* (translated into English in 1860 as *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*). This work is not only an account of the interaction between Ojibwa and Americans at mid-century and between Ojibwa and their environments, but also the best ethnography produced at this time on the Ojibwa people.

Why was Kohl's work on the Ojibwa so outstanding? It was how he observed the Ojibwa. Unlike other accounts that situated the Ojibwa in savagery and saw little good about their culture and their morals and sought to turn them into something they did not want to be, Kohl wrote of them as a people with their joys, hopes and fears, living in communities rooted in different environments not unlike Europeans. Repeatedly he compared aspects of Ojibwa religion, legends, material culture, behavior and inventiveness to similarities in European cultures. Kohl did not indiscriminately accept all of Ojibwa culture as good but he was quick to point out that in the European past similar concepts and behaviors could be found. Unlike the ethnocentrism that plagued American ethnology at that time, Kohl was a relativist. He observed the Ojibwa as surviving in a very difficult environment. Through stories, religion, and practice they lived an ecological life. If Europeans had invented tools to deal with their environment so had the Ojibwa. The Ojibwa were not flawed human held hostage by racial inferiority and inability to reason abstractly, as many Americans believed, but brothers to all mankind.

Kohl exhibited a sensitivity and perceptiveness in his ethnology that Americans did not nor could not match. Americans often denigrated Europeans attempts to study ethnology and especially race. Americans claimed that because they had both Indians and blacks in America, they

²⁶ Kohl. *Kitchi-Gami*. 34, 67, 81, 214, 225, 248-249, 311.

²⁷ Schumacher. "Kohls Amerikanische Studien". 143-144; Bieder, "Introduction." xxiv

were in a better position to make such studies. Kohl, however, proved them wrong. In regards to Indians, at least, Americans carried too much cultural baggage. Kohl, attuned to observing different peoples and cultures in Europe could see the Ojibwa through a different lens. This was Kohl's great contribution to ethnology and history.

An American philosopher once said that some people are moved by a different drummer.²⁸ Surely the Ojibwa were moved by a different drum and Kohl had a better ear than most to hear that drum and understand its rhythms.

²⁸ Henry D. Thoreau. *The Variorum Walden*. New York: Twayne Publisher, 1963. 261.