

# Gottfried Keller still the first Swiss writer

Autor(en): **Valk, William**

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# GOTTFRIED KELLER STILL THE FIRST SWISS WRITER

by William Valk

It is easy to pigeonhole Gottfried Keller as a cosy raconteur, a spinner of agreeable yarns, the chronicler of things Swiss in times gone by. People tend to regard the short story or Novelle form, of which Keller was a master, an art; his subject matter would seem to be eminently respectable, with nothing too out of the ordinary to disturb or provoke. Furthermore, he is highly readable—his style is after all free of the murderous syntax which bedevils much of German literature, and he does allow himself to laugh gently. This received opinion of Keller, widespread, understandable and shallow as it is, has led to the popularity of various of his works on school's syllabuses and as set texts for G.C.E. and University examinations. Undergraduates rely on Keller as a "soft option", an author they can swot up in a hurry if they are under-revised for an exam.

Out of all this, it is clear that a little knowledge of Keller's output is a dangerous thing; for while, superficially, it may seem a bit homely, closer study reveals Keller as a writer of considerable stature in German literature. All clichés have a certain core of truth, but in this case, it is restricted to external impressions and thus bears little relation to the subject which it travesties. Certainly Keller was no trail-blazer; he did not cut swathes through the European literary scene in the manner of a Goethe. But then, to be perfectly honest, few German men of letters ever have; and a reasoned study of Keller's work must place him near the front rank of German literature, even if that front rank is on the whole less glittering than that of French or English literature.

gift for observation. That his mind is not as complex as that of a Nietzsche is certain—but there is simple intelligence and complex intelligence, and who is to say that the latter is any deeper or better than the former? There is no reason to deride Keller on the grounds of his empirical, rather than theoretical, approach to life. Speaking personally, I am inclined to think that this approach yields much more, in terms both of art and of life. Moreover, it is high time that the ridiculous idea that a complex style is perforce indicative of a vast reservoir of meaning should be swept away. It frequently indicates no more than bad writing, or a cluttered mind, or both. Why clog one's wisdom in verbal constipation? Keller's clarity of style is admirable: like all good writers, he sees the virtue of making himself understood. To say that Keller is a simpleton is, in itself, an over-simplification.

## A master of the short story

So much for the myth. The received view of his works has been allowed to obscure his true stature. It is certainly not presumptuous to claim that he is of first importance on at least two counts. Firstly, his literary standing. German literature is curious in that, while it has produced one figure of towering genius (Goethe) and a few others of major European stature, it is otherwise strangely thin. After the extraordinary vitality of the years 1760-1810 Germany had to wait the best part of a century before another giant (Thomas Mann) came along. This is not to say that German literature was

devoid of good writers at this time: but while there were enough good ones around, France and England were pulsating with both good and great ones.

It would be an error of judgement to place Keller alongside Goethe and Schiller; but of those living and working in the middle of the 19th century in German-speaking lands, he is one of the greatest. Furthermore, he was certainly the most successful cultivator in his day of the short-story, a form which it is lamentably easy to under-rate; and this at a time when German literature was rich in good short stories. Droste-Hulshoff, Arnim, Brentano, Eichendorff, the brothers Grimm, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Jean-Paul, Kleist, Tieck and others had supplied a rich fund of Novellen during the first half of the century; and contemporaneously with Keller, Storm was writing then in Holstein, Morike in Stuttgart, and Meyer, his great rival, in Zurich itself. Formidable competition and yet what stories are as well known today as some of the "Leute von Seldwyla" stories, or the "Zuricher Novellen"? Probably only Droste's "Die Judenbuche" or Storm's "Der Schimmelreiter". Moreover, Keller's oeuvre was not confined to Novellen. His literary career started with poetry, and there is some fine verse in his "Neue Gedichte" collection of 1851. And his best known work, "Der Grune Heinrich", is a novel, admittedly uneven in quality, but a "Bildungsroman" in the true tradition of that form.

Secondly, Keller is possibly still the most important Swiss-German author. He is one of the best, and contributed to German literature in a manner quite disproportionate to her size.

## The tag of respectability

As for his suitability as an author free of indecency and fit for blushing maidens to read, no watchful supervisor could guarantee snow-white unimpeachability, for that would not be the truth, and truth as he sees it is something that Keller is very keen to put across. He can be unsparing in his observations of people's petty foibles and plain in his approach to moral issues. Yet his work has acquired the tag of respectability: a fatuous judgement, and one generally applied by those with fixed notions of the "niceness" of the short story form and who cannot see beyond this to art and truth. Keller is often approved of because of his apparent simplicity—this is due to his uncongested style, which in fact lays bare a keen intelligence and a supreme

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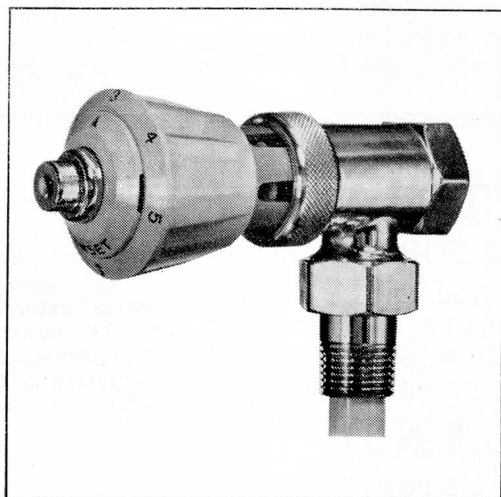
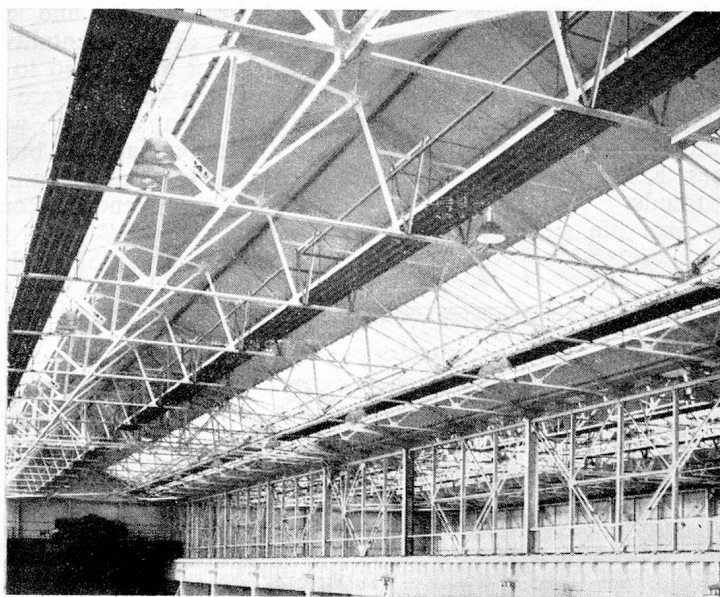
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His popularity among his own compatriots is unrivalled by any other Swiss writer. This is partly due to the accessibility of his work, which as stated earlier does not make it trivial, and partly because he can be seen as a kind of recorder of Swiss life and lore. Other Swiss authors may excel him in certain aspects; Meyer, for example, in the re-creative imagination of his fables, set in historical times and speaking for the vividness of his inner life. But he is a rounder figure than Meyer and the others, with his deep knowledge of rural and urban life in Switzerland, his awareness of the cultural importance of Germany and his independence of mind.

### A grey existence borne with humour

Keller's lifetime spans the literary changes of the 19th century. He was born in 1819, during the height of the German Romantic movement, and died in 1890, when the pervading literary ideas were those of the Realists and the new Naturalist school. The trends of the times are to a certain extent mirrored in his works. His first literary efforts in the 1840s were political poems, written at a time when many romantic writers all over Europe were emerging from their introspection and involving themselves in the politics of the day. Like many others, he was disappointed in the events of 1848. A more lasting trait is the love of nature, expressed at first in the romantic manner in his early lyric poetry, later to become a current running through all his works. Like many German writers, he produced a semi-autobiographical novel, the Bildungsroman "der Grune Heinrich", which can trace its literary ancestry back to Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister", and is not unrelated to the French "romans personnels". Towards the end of his life, he made an unsuccessful attempt to keep up with the new Realist and Naturalist literature by writing "Martin Salander", a story of squandered fortunes and disastrous marriages. Keller was plainly alive to literary trends.

His own life story was not particularly successful or eventful. After

a none too happy childhood, he went to Munich in 1840 in order to realise his dream to become a painter. It took him several years to see that this was not his true vocation. He turned to literature in the mid-1840s, starting with political verse. He gradually gained a reputation as a poet, and spent formative years in Heidelberg and Berlin. His writing career was somewhat stunted by his long period of service as First Secretary of Canton Zurich. After 1876 he was able to devote more time to writing. The last years of his life were rather solitary, though he was well known in Zurich. Much of his life was imbued with a sense of failure. His inability to succeed as a painter left its mark, as did his rather bleak personal life. Although he reportedly fell in love many times, he never married. He frequently had to endure poverty and ill-health. For the record, he must be Number One Tiny Man: he was four feet ten inches tall, which beats Dollfuss by an inch and the much vaunted Toulouse Lautrec by two.

### Writing with a painter's eye

The autobiographical novel "Der Grune Heinrich" broadly relates his early life: the memories of childhood, the efforts of painting, the unfulfilled love affairs, the return to Zurich to take up an anonymous administrative post—though in fact Keller's job as First Secretary of a Canton was far above what he allotted Heinrich. "Der Landvogt von Greifensee", one of the "Zuricher Novellen", is a catalogue of one man's unsuccessful loves, related in a string of miniature stories. But although this may sound gloomy, it is in fact charmingly told, and this is characteristic of Keller. His work is typified by geniality and good humour. His lack of sentimentality never allows his stories to descend to mawkishness.

While keenly aware of tragedy, he never forgets humour, which does not obtrude on sadness but preserves it from over-dramatisation. This can be seen in the splendid "Romeo and Julia auf dem Dorfe" from the collection "Die Leute von Seldwyla" which was

set to music by Delius under the name of "A village Romeo and Juliet". The opening scenes, when all is still well, are related with great good humour; but gradually Keller brings in an increasing sense of doom, and the story ends in suicide and despair. This famous story shows up various other key points of Keller's art; for example, his masterly descriptions, made through a painter's eye. Who shall be surprised at the importance of the visual for him? Here also is the love of nature, the deep knowledge of the Swiss countryside, the poetic sense with which the story is charged. Keller is no mean caricaturist and can mercilessly expose the pettiness and grotesqueries of people, as in the pithy story "Die drei gerechter Kammacher", also from "Die Leute von Seldwyla". And his concoction of the entire village of "Seldwyla", planted a good half hour's journey from the nearest river "as a manifest sign that nothing would ever become of it", is no mean feat of imagination".

### The philosophy of a genuine Swiss

Keller thus places universal themes in these familiar Swiss settings. He was not a theorist. If there is an underlying philosophy to his work it is a belief in the value of leading a good and wholesome life guided by common sense.

Like many writers of the time, he was not always careful about form. "Der Grune Heinrich" for example, remains rambling and episodic even after its revision, and the writing is not always of the first order. This is counter-balanced by its vividness as a work of "confession". Where Keller's sense of form lets him down, we can look for redeeming elements such as the humour, the vividness of the descriptions and the compassion for his fellow men. His interest in the visual appearance of people and things lead him to see it as an indicator of their inner nature, and this, combined with his sense of humour, is also responsible for the comic vein.

This geniality is one of the things that Keller's work still has to offer us today. His wisdom goes very deep, further I have suggested than the philo-

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sophies of many a more theoretical writer; and there is much that he can remind us of. As a story-teller and documenter of his time, he is without

parallel, and there is no reason why anyone researching on the Switzerland of the last century or even earlier should not refer to Keller. Finally,

some writers would do well to take a leaf out of his book and aim to write at least half as vividly and entertainingly.



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