

The Two Hans Breitmanns: Rudyard Kipling and Charles Godfrey Leland

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I. Introduction

Hans Breitmann, a German character, appears in Kipling’s two short stories, “Bertran and Bimi” and “Reingelder and the German Flag,” both collected in *The Life’s Handicap* (1891). In the former story, he is the narrator who happens to ride in the same steam boat with “I” to whom he told about his experience in the Malayan Archipelago, where he met Bertran, a Frenchman who lived with his pet orangutan Bimi almost as a friend and equal, dining at his table, smoking cigars, and sleeping in a bed. This story about Bertran and Bimi, narrated by Hans Breitmann, occupies most of the text. In the latter story, the German tells of a fellow-naturalist anxious to secure a specimen of the ‘German Flag,’ a tropical snake. When he obtains one, he ignores Breitmann’s advice and insists on handling it, relying on a statement in the standard handbook that the snake is not poisonous. He is bitten, and dies protesting at the unreliability of the authority in whom he had put his trust. Both titles “Bertran and Bimi” and “Reingelder and the German Flag” remind us of La Fontaine’s animal fables, whose titles also have the coordinate conjunction “and” binding human with animal.

It is worthy of notice that the two aforementioned stories are both narrated, with much rendering of his thick German accent, by Hans Breitmann, whom in fact, Kipling borrowed from Charles Godfrey Leland’s collection of humorous verse *Hans Breitmann’s Ballads* (1857 and subsequently) (Page, 118). Leland’s *Hans Breitmann Ballads* began with “Hans Breitmann’s Barty,” a six stanza ballad that he had written to fill a space in the “Editor’s Easy Talk” in the May, 1857, issue of *The Graham’s Magazine*, of which he was an editor at that time. Soon after its appearance in *Graham’s*, *Hans Breitmann’s Ballads* attracted immedi-

ate attention and was widely reprinted in the newspapers. This prose poem was composed in a burlesque German-American dialect. Leland was said to be a pioneer who created a new kind of humorous poetry.

This paper examines the two Hans Breitmanns described by Rudyard Kipling and Charles Godfrey Leland. First, Leland's Hans Breitmann as an international phenomenon is discussed. Then, the Breitmann character described by Kipling is compared to the former Breitmann, inspecting their contemporaneity. And finally, it re-considers who Hans Breitmann is and seeks for the reason why Kipling needed or borrowed Hans Breitmann from Charles Leland.

II. “Hans Breitmann” as an International Phenomenon

Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903), American humorist and essayist, was born in Philadelphia and graduated from Princeton in 1845. After studies at Heidelberg and Munich he was admitted to the Philadelphia bar, but after a brief legal career he turned to journalism. While editor of *Graham's Magazine* he composed and published “Hans Breitmann's Barty” (1856), the first of the German-American dialect poems for which he is famous.

His serious works on mysticism and philology never attained the popularity of these humorous verse parodies, which were collected after his death in Italy in the *Hans Breitmann Ballads* (1914).

Leland's poems were seen as humorous pieces by virtue of their most obvious characteristic—the curious linguistic form in which they were presented. The following is the first two stanzas of Breitmann's poem, one of his most famous ballads called “Hans Breitmann's Barty” that launched the popularity of the Breitmann Persona:

Hans Breitmann gife a barty;
Dey had biano-blayin',
 I felled in lofe mit a Merican frau,
 Her name vas Madilda Yane.
 She hat haar as prown ash a pretzel,
 Her eyes vas himmel-plue,
 Und when dey looket indo mine,
Dey shplit mine heart in dwo.

Hans Breitmann gife a barty,
 I vent dere Matilda Yane,
 I valtzet mit Matilda Yane,
 Und vent shipinnen' round und round.
De pootiest Fraulein in de house,
 She vayed 'pout dwo hoondred pound,

Und efery dime she gife a shoomp
She make de vindows sound. (Leland, *Ballads* 34)

Leland fortunately combined the cognate languages German and English in his first attempt to speak in the mixed dialect of an immigrant, thus permitting a blending not available in other combinations. This is the most attractive point of this ballad.

Leland wrote this way simply because he enjoyed the Germans and their speech, though their English had not yet become a distinct dialect. In other words, there was no fixed language form for Breitmann to use. At a loss for a precise term, this phenomenon is variously described as the “broken English of the half-Americanized German,” “mongrel English,” “the peculiar German-English,” “Dutch-English” or “Dutch-American.”

This ballad’s principle involved Jacob Grimm’s law of a rather regular interchange of aspirant and muted consonants.

One of this style’s prominent peculiarities is easily perceived. For example, as quoted above, in the language of Leland, “give” became “gife”; party—barty; they—dey; piano—biano; two—dwo; playing—blayin’; love—lofe; when—vhen; every—efery; as—ash; etc. This consists in the constant confounding of the soft and hard consonants; and the reader must bear it well in mind when translating the language that meets his/her eye into one that becomes intelligible to his/her ear.

Furthermore, in some cases Leland would use the German equivalent, such as “nichts” or “nix” for “nothing”; in others he would use his German-English hybrid words, such as “nodings” for “nothing.” According to Kersten, he used prototypes of the Spoonerism when he transposed the syllables of a word as in “moskopolite” for “cosmopolite.”

As this short extract shows, Leland was adept with the German and English languages. A detailed look also reveals his mastery of a broad range of humorous techniques. He had a sense for comic situations and a talent for finding the appropriate way to transfer his humorous vision to the printed page.

With such an inventory of humorous elements it is not hard to understand why Leland’s contemporaries relished the ballads. Bret Harte, one of those who understood the significance of Leland’s creation, once wrote in *The Overland Monthly*, “The great charm of Hans Breitmann is that he is something more than funny” (Harte, 196). And as Leslie Stephen pointed out, Hans Breitmann impersonates the German qualities, which had a great power in the American Republic: strong, shrewd, courageous, humorous, philosophic, thirsty (Stephen, 345).

However, there were also some severe criticisms of his ballads⁽¹⁾. “We had already, as a nation, the utmost verge which a reasonable regard to literary refinement could permit. Hans Breitmann carries it beyond that bound into the realm of clownish vulgarity” (anon., “rev. of Hans Breitmann’s Ballads,” 770). Jagendorf once mentioned about them, “These pieces resembled gargantuan drolleries, satirizing the gross, illiterate German immigrants and their foibles in many affairs: in war, traveling, religions, etc.” (Jagendorf, 215).

Thus, dialects can be a rather naive device instead of a distraction for adding verisimilitude to a work. These regional ways of speech were supplemented with what could be called “ethnic” dialects, English with interference from an immigrant’s mother tongue became a mode of literary expression. Defending those variations as deliberate, Leland wrote that anyone who knew any foreign language imperfectly spoke it better at one time than another. But his language distortion was obviously one of the elements that induced the reader’s laughter.

III. Leland’s Hans Breitmann

Prejudice against different nationalities repeatedly appears in Leland’s writings (Smith, 276). Criticism of the Irish occurred from his youth until his old age. The French fared almost as badly in his European letters, as well as in his *Memoirs* (403-404). The English and Jews were also given some expression of dislike.

These castigations of other nationalities did not arise from a chauvinistic attitude toward Americans, as Smith mentioned, because even “his countrymen suffered from his criticism; Leland eventually became an expatriate. Only Germany escaped any harsh word” (Smith, 276).

Most of the allusions in the poems grew out of Leland’s familiarity with German culture. As a student he had spent a year at the University of Heidelberg and six months at the University of Munich. Even before this European sojourn he had studied German at Princeton. As Kersten mentioned, he immersed himself intensely in German literature and culture (Kersten, 41). One can see the author as a simple soul who took great delight in dialect literature because he enjoyed the funny way foreigners talk.

Hans Breitmann is said to be the Jack Falstaff of the German-Americans; broad and burly, as his name imports (Stephen, 345). John Masefield describes Breitmann as follows:

We like him [Hans] when he is at peace, well primed with the schnapps, or the lager, or the sauer-kraut so dear to him. And then by the fireside, puffing the meerschaum of content, the warm reminiscences come gently to the soothed brain, and the story comes between tobacco puffs, ripely and well considered from a seasoned and mellowed personality. (Masefield, 344)

This description is very much like Kipling’s Hans Breitmann who narrates his story puffing “good night cigars” in “Bertran and Bimi.” It is not clear if he likes beer, though when he worried about the orangutan Bimi possibly committing an outrage on Bertran’s wife, Breitmann said that he wanted to go Bertran’s home and have a drink pretending he felt thirsty. Then Bertran said to him “come on dry mans” which implies Bertran thought Breitmann wanted something to drink, such as beer. The Breitmann in “Reingelder and the German Flag” begins with the following sentences:

Hans Breitmann paddled across the deck in his pink pajamas, a cup of beer in one hand and a cheroot in the other, while the steamer was sweltering down the coast on her way to Singapur. He drank beer all day and all night, and played a game called ‘Scairt’ with three compatriots.” (Kipling, *LH* 277)

Leland’s Hans Breitmann’s Ballads became so popular that Leland was often identified with this character and was even called by his name. Before John Hay and Bret Hart, his Breitmann ballads established the American dialect comic poem as an international phenomenon. He was lionized as Hans Breitmann and as Bret Harte and Harte Breitmann because the British were frequently unable to distinguish between the two American vernacular writers and their characters (Sloane, 263).

Therefore, it is not surprising that several reviewers and critics have suggested a close link between Leland and his most famous creation, Hans Breitmann. “In respect of certain genial traits the series was a burlesque autobiography,” wrote *The Pall Mall Gazette* on the occasion of Leland’s death, “and ‘Breitmann’ admirably describes Mr. Leland’s own physique.” Elizabeth Robins Pennell, Leland’s niece and biographer, supports this view: “Many touches of autobiography are in the ‘Ballads’ for anyone who can read between the lines” (Pennell, vol.1, 354).

Hans Breitmann, being an alternative Leland, sometimes becomes a soldier, a politician, or many personas. For example, in “Hans Breitmann in Politics,” Hans Breitmann appears as a politician:

... If any lightened man
Will seek in his Bibel, he’ll dat a publican
Is a barty ash sells lager; und de ding is fery blain,
Dat a re-publican ish von who sells id ‘gain und’ gain. (Leland, *Ballads* 146)

Hans Breitmann is a publican, while the other politician, named Smith, believes in God and goes to church and must be a teetotaler. Breitmann calls a meeting of Smith’s supporters, tells them that he hopes to get a good place for his friend Smith, though he cannot approve of Smith’s teetotal principles because he is a republican, and the meaning of that is he could sell beer repeatedly, as re-publican. This ballad is associated with the Prohibition party that was formed in 1869 under the Prohibition law. Leland, thus, combines contemporary issues with his own experiences and fascination with Germany.

On the other hand, Hans Breitmann was intended to embody the “spirit of ‘48” as an educated workingman with an incongruous education in the classics and a low position in life, a mix of the stoic and the epicurean. It is also said that Hans Breitmann’s prototype was said to be “a German serving during the war (of Secession) in the 15th Pennsylvanian Cavalry” (Masefield, 344), who was named “Jost,” “a desperate fighter” (Stephen, 345). Leland wrote a series of ballads dealing with Breitmann as a soldier in the Civil War, such as “Breitmann

in Battle” and “Breitmann in Maryland.”

IV. Kipling's Leland

As Leland had an intimate knowledge of things German, Kipling had a good spoken knowledge of Urdu and Hindustani, the lingua franca of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent; in addition, he was familiar with Punjabi. As a matter of fact, Kipling knew Urdu long before he learnt to speak English properly.

Kipling's works are interspersed with Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, and Panjabi words and phrases, which are not always translated into English. It goes without saying that these vernacular words add a touch of realism to the picture of the Anglo-Indian civil servant. The way in which the vernacular makes scenes and dialogues which he created come alive is especially seen in his soldier stories. Shamul Islam once said, “The English reader does not have to know the vernacular words, for the very sound and tone of these words and phrases contribute to the projection of the crude personality” of the character (Islam, 17). At the same time, what appealed to the Anglo-Indian soldiers themselves was “Kipling's genuine understanding their lot” (Ricketts, 162).

Kipling, in his “Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney,” seems to use lines from Leland's “Hans Breitmann's Ride to Church” as an epigraph.

Wohl auf, my bully cavaliers,
We ride to church to-day,
The man that hasn't got a horse
Must steal one straight away.
 [sic]
 Be reverent, men, remember.
 This is a Gottes haus.
 Du, Conrad, cut aong der aisle.
 And schenck der whiskey aus.
 ‘Hans Breimann's Ride to Church.’ (Kipling, *LH* 3)

As a matter of fact, none of Leland's Breitmanns ballads have that exact title; instead, there is one called ‘Hans Breitmann's Going to Church,’ and Kipling combines two separate half stanzas from it. The original runs:

“Wohlauf mine pully cafaliers,
Ve'll fide to shoorch to-day,
Each man ash hasn't cot a horse
Moost shteal von, rite afay.
 Dere's a raw, green corps from Michigan,

Mit horses on de loose,
You men ash vants some hoof-irons,
Look out und crip deir shoes.” (Leland, *Ballads* 104)

There are seventy-two lines between the two half-stanzas which Kipling misquotes (Green, 10). It is easy to realize that Leland’s has stronger German accents than Kipling’s. For example, Kipling’s “church” must be Leland’s “shoorch,” the former’s “must steal” the latter’s “moost shtéal.”

Kipling had a clear intention for using dialects in his writings. When Frederick Cowles, an apprentice writer had sent him a short story for comment, Kipling responded with encouragement and practical advice: “The dialect is unnecessarily misspelled. All you have to do is to give the reader a notion of the dialect. If he knows it he will read in the rest. If he does not no amount of commas and elisions will help him” (Pinney, 104).

The ballad “Breitmann’s Going to Church” is based on a real occurrence. A certain colonel with his men, really did, during the war, go to a church in or near Nashville. Kipling’s character Mulvaney, with his fellows Ortheris and Learoyd, is an Anglo-Indian private who becomes one of the major representatives of the common soldier facing the rigor of military life, the isolation of a foreigner in a strange land, and the harshness of the Indian climate.

As well as Leland, to a certain extent, Kipling also draws a clear distinction between himself and his soldiers. His framing narrative and explanatory passages are given in standard English; his soldiers speak in heavy dialect. In other stories, Mulvaney is an Irishman, Ortheris a Cockney, and Learoyd a Yorkshireman. Kipling attempts to reproduce their accents, telling the story in an at times almost “impenetrable cacophony of sounds” (Bauer, 30), using the image of Leland’s Hans Breitmann.

V. Conclusion

A blend of frontier robustness, “Yankee shrewdness, the American practical joke, and the awkward conviviality of the German immigrant” (Bradley, 66), Leland’s Hans Breitmann spoke a grotesque German-American made humorously familiar to American ears by the German settlers. The stanzas quoted give good examples of the author’s special dialect, wherein there is a strong German element, and occasionally words which are half-way between English and German are coined. These poems bring us back to the time when the languages had not separated. For Americans, however, don’t see Hans Breitmann as a stereotype of themselves.

As for Kipling, the reader is also hard to put to understand the language of Mulvaney and his fellows. One can sympathize with them, yet know that they do not represent oneself. Not only is their language too foreign, their hoaxes are sometimes too crude and harsh to be fully justified.

After all, references to the “Hans Breitmann” poems of C. G. Leland crop up in Kipling,

while the glories of Uncle Remus are extolled in “The United Idollaters” collected in *Debits and Credits* (Duffy, 345). For Kipling, it was an attempt to annex for Mulvaney part of the territory of Leland’s cynical, hard-living, battered exile of ’48, who quarters his troops in a church, swills whisky in the aisle with a grim indecency, and listens with genuine emotion to a fellow-exile playing on the organ the melodies of the fatherland.

[Notes]

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1. Since he encountered some negative comments regarding his attitude toward Germany, he pointed out in his preface that he did not intend to “ridicule or satirize” the German cause.

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[Abstract]

The Two Hans Breitmanns: Rudyard Kipling and Charles Godfrey Leland

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The fictional character “Hans Breitmann” is described by the 19th century British writer Rudyard Kipling and his contemporary American humorist Charles Godfrey Leland. Kipling borrowed this character which was created by Leland, who was the author of the Hans Breitmann Ballads which alone of all his writings preserve his reputation into the present. However, even these dialect poems, famous in the 1870s, are largely forgotten by the general reader today. This paper examines and compares Kipling’s Hans Breitmann to Leland’s and considers the cultural foundations upon which this character was made.