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**Carl Gottlob Küttner: In Search of an Older Ireland**

**Abstract:** Carl Gottlob Küttner, German from Saxony by birth, travelling tutor by calling, and life-long educator, discovered an Ireland full of contradictions in 1783/84. Living with the gentry, but searching for the culture of Gaelic Ireland, he shared many insights in letters to a friend in Leipzig. Can his insights be of relevance today again?

## 1. Küttner's Background and the Contemporary Context

My contribution explores a little-known book of thirty-nine letters, the first German eyewitness account of early modern Ireland, in 1783-88[i] by Carl Gottlob Küttner. His extensive travel observations and articles about Irish history and culture fill 448 pages in Gothic typeface. A digitized copy from the Sächsische Landesbibliothek/Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden is the basis for CELT's electronic edition, and a link to the latter is supplied for convenience. Between June and September 1783, twenty-three letters were penned, and thirteen between June and August 1784. Fourteen letters written in London during January and February 1785 were designed to complement them. To my knowledge, they have neither been widely discussed in Ireland nor Germany, although they were treated in books addressing German travellers to Ireland collectively (Oehlke; Sagarra; and Bourke). In the latter selection extracts of Küttner's writings in English translation may be found. Küttner came to Ireland in his capacity as a travelling tutor, in the service of George de la Poer Beresford, 2nd Earl of Tyrone (1735-1800). He was a member of the Irish Parliament which had gained greater legislative powers in 1782, due to various factors in current domestic and international politics. Beresford was also the highest-ranking civil servant in Co. Waterford. His family spent most of their time in England, but visited their Irish estate, Curraghmore, on the river Suir, still owned by that family today, in the summers of 1783 and 1784.

This gave Küttner the opportunity to record his experiences and observations in long letters to his childhood friend Christian Gottlieb Schenk, at the time teacher at the renowned Nikolaischule in Leipzig.

Between 1756 and 1763 the Electorate of Saxony, linked to Poland in personal union by Elector of Saxony and King of Poland Augustus II the Strong, experienced the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) ending in the defeat of Saxony, a heavy load of reparations paid to Prussia, and the end of former Saxon glory. Küttner was born in Wiedemar near Delitzsch in 1755, as the oldest of thirteen children of the local parson, Carl Gottlob Küttner, and his wife Johanna Regina, née Börsch. At age ten, he came to live with his paternal grandparents in the Ore Mountains, attending the famous Annaberg Latin school, where he met Schenk who was born in 1749 (Friedrich 4, ftn. 2). From 1770 to 1776 Küttner studied philosophy, classical and modern languages at Leipzig university[ii] before starting his first employment in Basle, Switzerland, with the prominent Burckhardt family, an experience which led to his first book publication.[iii] The employment had been arranged by assistance of Christian Felix Weiße, a well-connected dramatist, poet and translator in Leipzig's learned circles. The content of Küttner's first book details his life with the Burckhardts, his entrée to Basle's polite society and intellectual circles, which broadened his horizon and sharpened his observation skills, before he took up employment with the Beresfords. Küttner was therefore an accomplished foreigner and privileged outsider during his stay in Ireland. His letters paint a vivid picture of all that he observed, read, and heard while tutoring. In reply to Schenk's suggestion to publish the letters, he asked to first remove any confidential details regarding his employer's family (Küttner, Briefe über Irland 21) (we learn nothing about his teaching schedule either). Küttner's relationship with them was excellent and lasting. He stayed with his charges until 1793/94, accompanying them on their travels through Germany to Italy, before he returned to Leipzig. In 1797, they asked him again, and he travelled with them through the North of Germany and Denmark to Sweden and Norway (Friedrich 17-18). Both journeys resulted in books: *Wanderungen durch die Niederlande, Deutschland und die Schweiz und Italien in*

*den Jahren 1793 und 1794* (1796) and *Reise durch Teutschland, Dänemark, Schweden, Norwegen und einen Theil von Italien in den Jahren 1997-99* (1801). After leaving the Beresfords, he received a pension from them, living as a private scholar until he died, shortly before his fiftieth birthday, in Leipzig. Before coming to Ireland, Küttner consulted a journal written by English traveller Richard Twiss, *A Tour in Ireland* (1776). Being aware of its controversial reception in Ireland, he too found much to censure:

> Lessing says somewhere, if you want to write a book, you should choose an opponent, and the topic will come by itself. Doing so, I would have soon found mine in Mr Twiss, an Englishman who published his *Tour in Ireland* a few years ago. I read his book to prepare for coming here, and now I think the Irish are right to complain bitterly about him, regarding his travel journal as the most spiteful, most impertinent thing you could make up about a country. I have no idea what can have caused that man to belittle a whole country, and a whole people who received him very hospitably, but this I know: that his work is riddled with errors, and his manner of looking at things very different from mine. (33)[iv]

Possibly Küttner already entertained the thought of compiling a second book at that time, although when approached by Schenk later, he seemed hesitant. Then, warming to the idea, he added a second part to it, containing historical and contemporary background for readers at home. The Celtic revival was in full swing, and he discussed James Macpherson's *Ossian*, published in 1760, repeatedly in his letters. Its reception has created a large body of research literature over the centuries. Constraints of space do not allow for a more detailed treatment, but Küttner shows himself as a diligent critic and judge by the standards of his time (*Briefe über Irland* 115, 225, 249-50, 254-58, 309-10 and 441). Compared to other travel literature, Küttner's story differed, on one hand because he was from Germany, where, as he claimed, Ireland was very little known, and if at all, predominantly through the lens of English writers and their views: "Ireland is a country which is hardly known on the continent, or falsely known. It is even terribly misunderstood by the English"

(32). This was not due to lack of interest, since the works about Ireland by Arthur Young, Richard Twiss, and Thomas Campbell all saw German editions within two years of publication. Knowledge about the German states was equally rare in Ireland, as he wryly remarked: "In this country it is unheard of to have a German around, and people who visit and are not acquainted with me, never dream that a German is sitting beside them at the table. And I can tell you, sometimes I hear really edifying stories . . ." (271).[v] On the other hand, his account differed because he was not one of those independent travellers who toured Ireland for their own enjoyment, or to learn about economy, agriculture, and the state of the country, such as English agriculturalist Young, or German businessman and social reformer Caspar Voght. Rather, Küttner's stories were the by-product of daily reading newspapers and books, as well as living and conversing every day with some of the wealthiest members of the Anglo-Irish politico-social elite, as an outsider. He was a *Bildungsbürger* who stood his ground due to his education and keen perceptiveness. Also, nearly every page of his stories breathes his desire to teach, making him an excellent example for using storytelling in teaching intercultural competence to his readers. His outside view, soon enriched by insights gained through private self-education and conversation, his direct encounter with Anglo-Irish culture, and indirect encounter with Irish culture, reflects topics of enduring interest today. Below, I will discuss three of them.

**2. Landscape, Agriculture and Wood Cover**

The rich variety and beauty of the Irish landscape has regularly been commented upon by visitors. Küttner contrasts the grandeur of former glory with the stark poverty of the present, but also notes a distinct lack of village settlements: "Also, you forget initially that . . . there is no village to be seen anywhere in the whole wide area you overlook from the height, and that all the hilltops lack wood cover" (70).[vi] He describes the usual sight in County Waterford:

> (I found) the whole county of Waterford and the major part of several others: everywhere beautiful and fertile land, but poorly tilled; everywhere ruins of

> churches, abbeys, and monasteries; everywhere precious buildings and beautiful parks, beside the most miserable cabins I have ever seen, villages nearly nowhere – and the most abject poverty among the rural people. (70)[vii] The Dutch author and physician Gerard Boate[viii] devoted a whole chapter to the woods of Ireland, counting them, together with bogs and barren mountains among "the barren parts". In contrast, only "meadows, arable grounds, and pastures" were considered fruitful in the established opinion in Ireland (70).

For the deforestation of most of Ireland's woods by 1650, Boate cited political and economic reasons, as prosecution of rogues, the timber trade, and land tillage:

> . . . the English having settled themselves in the land, did by degrees greatly diminish the woods in all the places where they were masters, partly to deprive the thieves and rogues, who used to lurk in the woods in great numbers, of their refuge . . . and partly to gain the greater scope of profitable lands. For the trees being cut down, the roots stubbed up, and the land used and tilled . . . the woods in most part of Ireland may be reduced . . . to very good pastures, to excellent arable and meadow. Through these two causes it is come to pass in the space of many years, yea of some ages, that a great part of the woods, which the English found in Ireland at their first arrival there, are quite destroyed, so as nothing at all remaineth of them at this time. (67-68)

Two chapters treat mines, mining and iron works (69-77) which burned a large amount of wood for melting. Furthermore, Irish timber, especially oak, had been used for centuries by English settlers and the colonial administration to build ships, barrels, houses, and flooring, as documented in detail by Nigel Everett. Although large scale planting of trees was supported and encouraged by the Dublin Society (Everett 208, 245), and undertaken mostly by enlightened landowners, it could not stop the slow loss of woodland.

If we look at official statistics today, Ireland is the EU country with the second least wood cover: "At 10.9%, forest cover in Ireland in 2015 was one of the lowest in the EU, where the

average forest cover was 33.5%; Worldwide forest cover was 30.6%." Of "all the EU Member States, since 1990 Ireland has had the highest rate of increase in forest expansion as a percentage of total forest cover" (*Ireland's Forests* 82). So, before 1990 woodland cover must have been even lower.

Global climate change demonstrates how pressing the issue of afforestation is. In Ireland it is debated in the media again. As the *Irish Examiner* reported, in December 2022 land "earmarked for forestry" (Hoare) was sold to UK Investment Fund Gresham House. An Investment Fund has been entrusted with replanting trees, later to be sold as commodities. The plan was quietly approved by the Irish Agriculture Minister, and the deal closed, while the public was still discussing what little they heard about it, though details were not made public. The "intense scrutiny and criticism from TDs and senators at an Oireachtas Agriculture Committee to discuss [the semi-state forest agency] Coillte's €200 m[illion] plan" (Hoare) was not enough to stop this. Irish Forestry Policy has long been controversial in Ireland itself, and was recently criticised by the European Commission, if we believe the newspaper report *European Commission criticises Ireland's forestry policy* (2023):

> The European Commission has criticised Ireland's forestry policy in a scathing letter which highlighted particular concerns around planting on peatlands and the impact on birds. In the leaked document, seen by the *Irish Examiner*, the commission's directorate general for environment says a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) report submitted as part of the draft national forestry plan does not "sufficiently address" concerns. (Hosford)

If there are lessons to be learnt from history – and keeping in mind that Küttner only recorded a situation that had been deteriorating over roughly 150 years – one is that the environment is still not protected as it ought to be. While foreign powers held sway over Ireland, they might justifiably be blamed for environmental degradation and exploitation, but a hundred years after gaining independence in 1922, the Irish government has still not put robust measures in place to mitigate the impact of tree loss, and will even consider planting trees on peatlands, which are protected

separately. Previous generations fought for political independence, hoping their own government would set things right, but the environment is still the poor relative, despite climate change, and even despite Ireland's carefully promoted image as a beautiful tourist destination.

**3. The Failed Mass Immigration Scheme of New Geneva**

Ireland has long attracted foreign settlers to its shores, whether Flemings, Huguenots or Palatines. Schenk asked Küttner for information about the latest settlement scheme intended to bring skilled labour to Ireland. Küttner wrote on 3 August 1784:

> You want to know about the Genevans, to whom I am very close. . . . The Duke of Leinster offered the Genevans twenty thousand acres of land on his estate. The Genevans accepted the gift, but now the Duke recognized that he had acted too hastily and revoked his promise . . . . However, this occasion inspired many Genevans to consider settling down on this island. . . . The King owns twelve hundred acres of land in County Waterford, which were to be allocated to the Genevans for a completely new town. The spot has been marked out, and it is beautiful and well situated indeed. (29)

Küttner details (28-31) how the leaders of the Geneva Peoples' Party (*Représentants*), Étienne Clavière and Jacques-Antoine Du Roveray, who in 1782 had failed in their attempts to overthrow the Geneva government, and been banished from Geneva, travelled to Waterford to negotiate a proposed resettlement of Geneva families with Anglo-Irish nobles and members of the Irish Parliament. A sum of 50,000£ sterling was offered to build a completely new town, and to bring the poorer inhabitants of Geneva to Waterford. 25£ sterling per family were offered to defray the costs of immigration. After negotiations stalled, eventually the plan fell through, which Küttner attributed mainly to the unrealistic political demands of the Genevan negotiators, but there is also a hint at the Irish negotiators' prevarications once they realized the full scale of the Genevan mentality (Ryan). This failed scheme had the hallmarks of a very complex operation, whose various stakeholders

originally came together to explore resettlement options of a highly skilled group of workers with their families, apparently for mutual benefit, but it seems that every party tried to further their own ends, to gain most by the scheme. The expectations raised first were high on all sides, leading to hasty promises, but when all concomitants were reassessed, such as the political implications of granting voting rights to the new settlers, previous promises were withdrawn, and the plans abandoned. This fiasco may serve as a cautionary tale. Today's complaints about skills shortages in the labour market and a lack of specialists hampering the economy may teach us to plan for inward migration carefully, and, rather than look for windfalls, to deal with the realities of a situation, and perhaps most importantly, to respect that people have their own wishes and needs, being agents of their own destinies, rather than pawns on a chess board.

**4. Searching for an Older Ireland**

After Küttner had agreed to Schenk publishing his Irish letters, he wrote in January 1785 of his decision to add, as a second part, an outline of Irish culture and history to his work. Clearly the years spent tutoring left their trace, and given this chance to complement his letters, he extended his teaching to his readers at home. Küttner hoped to foster a deeper understanding, sharing his awareness of the Ireland he had found. He intended to "compile what I have gathered together as well as the time you allow me permits; translate parts from various works, make extracts and add my own notes" (276-77).[ix] But his search was not easy. Although he had access to his employer's library, to a range of newspapers, and conversed daily with educated men, he looked in vain for scholars of Gaelic Ireland.

To set out referencing in his essay, he stated "it would be onerous for me and for the reader if I gave references every time I state something myself, or give extracts, add anything, or modify and translate from this or that work" (277)[x]. Instead, following the standards of the time, he named the main sources he used: Campbell's *Survey*, Charles Vallancey's *Essay* and *Grammar,* and Ferdinand Warner's *History*. His use of Campbell is wide-ranging and whole passages from the

*Survey* can be found translated.[xi] The manner in which Küttner selected his materials is interesting for reception history, cultural studies and Celtic studies. He fell for misinformation sometimes, but tried hard to give a balanced view. On every page the great care he took is obvious, as is his sustained effort to present contradictory information adequately to his readers. In doing so, he made use of the skills gained in intercultural mediation, reasoning: "Irish history was also in the poets, and the bards' hands, and probably they were not shy of making things up. I guess it would be very difficult to find out the pure truth, but to dismiss everything because of it, would be very unfair" (280).[xii] His enthusiasm about Vallancey seems more problematic to me. Unfortunately Colonel Charles Vallancey (1725?-1812) (Nevin) who came to Ireland as an English military surveyor and developed a deep and abiding interest in Irish antiquities, was no scholar. In his books, he put forward his own often fanciful theories on Irish history and language. Küttner had heard about this author, however, he was not aware of books' flaws, absorbing them eagerly. In his own circles, there was nobody to advise him on these matters, nobody who knew better. Vallancey undoubtedly had a keen interest in antiquities and was even made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Society. He spoke with the flair of an expert, as Küttner's anecdote of meeting him unknowingly on the mail-boat shows:

> Among various people . . . I spotted a strong, masculine, handsome man with whom I soon started to converse. He spoke like a scholar, although I would have rather taken him to be an officer. We talked about Ossian, Macpherson . . . and he seemed to be minutely acquainted with all of them. He understood Irish, which led us to a long conversation about the antiquities of this country. He told me many wonderful things, claimed to know a lot about ancient languages and the antiquities of all the countries, he ran down some scholars of great reputation, seemed to correspond with half the scholarly world, in short, he talked in such a tone, that finally I took him for an educated boast; and thus, gave up a conversation which he seemed willing to continue. But how I later regretted my error when I heard he was the Colonel

> Vallancey! . . . I learned only after disembarking in whose company I had been, and what an opportunity I had squandered, to receive more detailed instructions about a lot of *Hiberniana*, instructions which no man alive today may be better placed to give than Vallancey. (225-26)[xiii]

Küttner searched in vain for more information about the Irish language (114-16), but among the gentry almost nobody understood it, although the majority of the Irish people spoke it. He found its sound "very guttural, even more so than the Zurich speech, and very unpleasant to the ear" (115).[xiv] He was not aware of any books written in Irish, except prayer books and the bible. When Küttner had asked around "if the Irish language was similar to the Celtic, for instance to the original of Ossian" as he suspected, no one could tell him. Küttner also admitted he understood very little of the English the common people were speaking (115-16).

Clearly he was delighted, after such a fruitless search, to meet Vallancey, a prominent figure keen on Irish antiquities, who had authored books and essays about the language. Understandably Küttner was led on by his only contact who knew some Irish and who seemed to be a gatekeeper to the hidden treasures of ancient Ireland.

What can we learn from this story for today? We know better about Vallancey at least. In Küttner's era, he was considered controversial, even crazy, in circles of Gaelic scholars to which Küttner did not have access. In conclusion, one can get into murky waters, always, when looking for information in the wrong places. Küttner did so in good faith, and Vallancey genuinely believed in his own ill-founded theories and speculations. Today, in contrast, we have easy access to a wealth of information, but we too must be aware of false information, both deliberate and erroneous. To my mind, our critical thinking faces an ever greater challenge, in separating the wheat from the chaff on the Internet.

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i **Endnotes**

All translations are mine. German eighteenth-century orthography of Saxon flavour in the notes has been left to stand. For his first name, both Carl and Karl are in use. I have used Carl.

ii For rich details about Küttner's background and contacts in Leipzig, see Friedrich 190, 3-8; Ratzel, 443-44; and Wolter.

iii His employer, the Patrician Johann Rudolf Burckhardt belonged to the wealthy Basle elite. The letters from Switzerland to Schenk appeared in three parts as *Briefe eines Sachsen aus der Schweiz an seinen Freund in Leipzig, herausgegeben von M. Schenk*. (1785/86).

iv "Lessing sagt irgendwo, wenn man ein Buch schreiben wolle, so solle man sich einen Gegner wählen, und dann werde der Stoff schon von selbst kommen. In Nachahmung dessen hätte ich meinen Gegner gar bald in Herrn Twiß gefunden, einem Engländer, der vor einigen Jahren eine Reise durch Irland herausgab. Ich las dieses Buch als eine Vorbereitung zu meiner Reise in dieses Land, und finde nun, daß die Irländer recht haben, wenn sie bitterlich über ihn schreyen, und seine Reisebeschreibung als das hämischste, unverschämteste Ding, das man über ein Land aushecken kann, betrachten. Was den Mann bewogen haben kann, ein ganzes Land und ein ganzes Volk, bey dem er sehr hospital empfangen wurde, so zu verkleinern, weiß ich nicht, das aber weiß ich, daß sein Werk voller Irrthümer, und seine Art, die Sachen anzusehen, sehr von der meinigen unterschieden ist" (33).

v "Es ist hier zu Lande etwas so unerhörtes, einen Deutschen um sich zu haben, daß Leute, die hieher kommen, und mich nicht weiter genau kennen, es sich nie träumen lassen, daß ein Deutscher neben ihnen am Tische sitzt. Da höre ich denn manchmal erbauliche Sachen . . . " (271).

vi "Auch vergißt man anfangs, daß, einige schöne Landhäuser ausgenommen, welche mit elenden, zerstreuten Hütten contrastiren, in der ganzen weiten Gegend, die man von der Anhöhe überschaut, fast kein Dorf zu sehen ist, und daß die Spitzen der Berge alle ohne Waldung sind" (70).

vii "Überall ein schönes, fruchtbares, aber schlecht angebautes Land; überall Trümmer von Kirchen, Abteyen und Klöstern; überall kostbare Gebäude und schöne Parke, neben den elendesten Hütten,

die ich je gesehen habe, fast nirgends Dörfer, und unter dem Landvolke die schmählichste Armuth" (70).

viii A reprint of the Dublin 1725 edition, with introduction and index, was consulted. The work was first published as *Irelands Naturall History* posthumously in 1652 (Armstrong).

ix "Ich will also das Gesammelte zusammen tragen, so gut als die Zeit, die Sie mir bestimmen, es zuläßt; aus verschiedenen Werken Stücke übersetzen; aus anderen Auszüge machen und mit Bemerkungen vermehren" (276-77).

x "Es würde für mich mühsam, und für den Leser beschwerlich seyn, wenn ich jedesmal anführen sollte, wo ich selbst rede, oder Auszüge gebe, vermehre, abändere, und bald aus dem, bald aus jenem Werke übersetze" (277).

xi Küttner translates or paraphrases Campbell often, e.g. a reference to Celtic philosophy 377 translates Campbell 235; Küttner referring to Scaliger 395 reflects Campbell 390, Küttner's comments on Scottish learning 412-415 originate from Campbell 401-405, and material from Küttner 422-26 is taken from Campbell 412-414.

xii "Die Irische Geschichte war gleichfalls in den Händen der Dichter, der Barden, und vermuthlich sparten sie auch ihre Erfindungen nicht. Reine Wahrheit heraus zu bringen, ist vermuthlich sehr schwer; aber das Ganze deswegen zu verwerfen, wäre höchst ungerecht" (280).

xiii "Unter verschiedenen Leuten . . . befand sich ein starker, männlicher, wohlaussehender Mann, mit dem ich bald in Gespräch kam. Er sprach wie ein Gelehrter, ob ich ihn schon eher für einen Officier halten mochte. Wir sprachen von Ossian, Macpherson, Johnson, Court de Gebelin etc. etc. und er schien mit allen eine genaue Bekanntschaft zu haben. Er verstund Irisch, und dies brachte uns in eine lange Unterredung über die Alterthümer dieses Landes. Er sagte mir eine Menge wunderbarer Dinge, machte Anspruch auf große Kenntnisse der alten Sprachen, und die Alterthümer aller Länder, haute verschiedene Gelehrte von großem Namen nieder, schien mit der gelehrten halben Welt in Briefwechsel zu seyn, kurz, sprach so viel in dem Tone, daß ich ihn endlich für einen gelehrten Prahler hielt, und eine Unterredung aufgab, die er fortzusetzen willig zu

seyn schien. Wie sehr bedauerte ich nachher meinen Irrthum, als ich hörte, daß es der Oberste Vallancey war. . . . Ich erfuhr erst nach der Landung, in wessen Gesellschaft ich gewesen war, und welche Gelegenheit ich verloren hatte, genauern Unterricht über eine Menge *Hiberniana* zu empfangen, einen Unterricht, den vielleicht kein jeztlebender Mann besser geben kann, als Vallancey." (225-26)

xiv "Sie ist ganz guttural, selbst noch mehr als die Züricher, und äusserst unangenehm fürs Ohr" (115).