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Martin Luther as a National Hero in the Nineteenth Century

by Hartmut Lehmann

I will call this Luther a true Great Man; great in intellect, in courage, affection and integrity; one of our most lovable and precious men. Great, not as a hewn obelisk; but as an Alpine mountain,—so simple, honest, spontaneous, not setting-up to be great at all; there for quite another purpose than being great! Ah, yes, unsubdiable granite, piercing far and wide into the Heavens; yet in the clefts of its fountains, green beautiful valleys with flowers! A right Spiritual Hero and Prophet; once more, a true Son of Nature and Fate, for whom these centuries, and many that are to come yet, will be thankful to Heaven.

This fulsome quotation is from Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, to be precise, from his fourth lecture, on 'The Hero as Priest', delivered in 1840.¹ Twelve years later, in 1852, Carlyle travelled to Germany and visited the Wartburg. 'I believe I actually had tears in my eyes there, and kissed the old oak-table, being in a very flurried state of nerves', he wrote to Emerson in a letter half a year later, 'my belief was that under the canopy there was not at present so holy a spot as that same'.² A generation later the Religious Tract Society of London published *Luther Anecdotes: Memorable Sayings & Doings of the Great Reformer. Gathered from his books, letters, and history; and illustrating his life and work* as the title explains in detail, and there we read the following about 'the extraordinary excellence' of Luther's 'personal character as a man and a Christian':

Mighty in intellect, strong in common sense, eloquent in speech, dauntless in courage, tender in spirit, warm in affection; all his natural gifts and virtues were consecrated to God, and he was as superior to most men in spiritual graces as in intellectual and moral endowments. With faith like that of one of the old prophets or apostles, he exhibited also a humility and self-sacrifice equal to that which had been seen in the greatest saints and confessors and martyrs.

In summary this tract remarked: 'Whether in his person or in his work, we can never sufficiently admire the grace of God in him'.³ Many more examples could be given to illustrate my point: Luther was a hero well beyond nineteenth-century Germany. Perhaps, he possessed the rank of a special national hero for the Germans, his qualities were praised, however, in many countries of Western Europe and North America. Only a small part of his fame can be covered here.

1. Luther in Nineteenth-Century Germany
By 1800 remembrance of Luther among Germans had passed through several stages. First, the direct heirs of Luther in German Lutheran churches had stressed the dogmatic aspects of his writings; although they at times disagreed about his theological intentions, they all tried to build a system of orthodox Lutheran faith. Then, in the latter part of the seventeenth century the Pietists promoted the young Luther whom Lutheran orthodoxy had neglected, reviving what Luther had to say about priesthood and education, yet claiming at the same time that it was their mission to continue and complete the Reformation Luther had begun. Thirdly, enlightenment philosophers dwelt on Luther. For them he was the apostle of freedom who had overcome the oppressions of the dark Middle Ages; in enlightened thought Luther was no longer God’s instrument or a prophet sent by God, but learned and courageous, open-minded and quick-witted, a true ancestor of their own cause. The famous men of German classicism and idealism, then, were totally fascinated by what they considered Luther’s genius; for them he was a truly creative human being. ‘He is the one who awoke the German language like a sleeping giant and set it free, he is the one who did away with scholastic phrase-mongering as with a money-changer’s table; he has elevated the thinking and feeling of a whole nation’, these the words of Herder in 1767, and one of many passages in which he praises Luther’s achievements. Herder projected a book on Luther, the teacher of the German nation. Luther was also a great man for Lessing and Goethe; and Fichte ‘genuinely believed that a new super-reformation, based on Luther but refined by German idealist philosophy and especially his own theory of science, would lend the German people its much-needed spiritual unity to complement its expected political unification’. Hegel, finally, declared that Luther and the Reformation had advanced mankind to a new level.

Of course, not all German celebrities in the years around 1800 contributed to Luther’s fame in the same measure. Kant was familiar, as far as we know, only with Luther’s Small Catechism, and Schiller was more interested in the effects of the Reformation than in the man who had effected the Reformation. Even more important was the critical tone in the works of some of the early romanticists. Novalis, for instance, regretted that the Reformation had broken Christian unity, and he derived the negative aspects of rationalism and the French Revolution from that event. Friedrich Schlegel gave credit to Luther on the one hand for having abolished grave disorders in the church, and rejected on the other hand the notion that the Reformation should have brought freedom of thought. His brother, August Wilhelm, stressed the latter argument, and other Catholic romantic writers, foremost among them Joseph Goerres, saw an even greater distance between themselves and the Protestant reformer. The impact of these voices should not be overestimated, however; and we can say that although Luther’s works and deeds were not praised unanimously in Germany in the years around 1800, there were strong intellectual and cultural forces which attributed to him an important place in the history of mankind.

In the course of the nineteenth century many influential German philosophers, historians and theologians spread Luther’s fame even further. It is important to note that many of these admirers had different intentions when they invoked his name. The supporters of the liberal movement may be mentioned first. From the time of the Wartburgfest in 1817 (when many of them assembled to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the day Luther posted his theses), they claimed him as their true forefather, their view of Luther being as simple as it was idealized. The German liberals of the nineteenth century venerated their own image when they called Luther the liberator of all Germans. Had he lived in their times, he would have fought Meteorich, they implied. The political enemies of the liberals, the conservatives, also made Luther one of their own, and their view was hardly more refined than the liberal one. For the conservative circles in Germany, ruling since 1815, shaken in 1830 and even more in 1848, Luther was the champion of due respect to secular as well as to spiritual authority. While the liberals cherished most the scene at Worms in 1521, when in the cause of liberty Luther had challenged emperor and empire, the conservatives praised what Luther had to say about political obedience, including even his bitter writings during the Peasants’ War of 1525. Much the same position was taken by the orthodox clergy in the German Lutheran churches. They pointed to Luther as defending their authority, while the Pietists remembered his will to reform. Finally, there were the historians, and especially the most influential member of their guild, Leopold von Ranke. Basing his description on a careful reading of Luther’s works, but also considering what Herder and Fichte had said, Ranke saw Luther as a deeply religious man, thus evading much of the controversy between liberals and conservatives and minimizing the differences between the orthodox and the Pietist view of Luther. The Reformation was a necessary event, Ranke stated against Catholic romanticists, and according to him it was Luther’s special achievement that he had initiated change without causing
destruction; for Ranke, in short, Luther was a moderate, observing and strengthening the continuity of politics and culture in Germany, despite all the discontinuity which he had caused.

In 1883 Luther's 400th birthday was the occasion for solemn celebration in many parts of Germany. True, since the Wartburgfest of 1817 a number of Luther jubilees had been celebrated—the 300th year of his death in 1846, for instance, or the 350th anniversary of his posting the theses—but all of these jubilees were by far surpassed by the extent and the pompous language of the 1883, the first Luther anniversary to be observed after the unification of 1871. All the voices I have mentioned made themselves heard in 1883, the liberals and the conservatives, orthodox and Pietist Protestants, all trumpeting forth that Luther's legacy had been fulfilled and that they were his true heirs. Moreover, there were also new voices in 1883, and most remarkable among them the historian Heinrich von Treitschke who pointed out the obvious contrasts in Luther's character: 'The strength of his crushing wrath and the intimacy of his pious faith; his high wisdom and his childlike innocence; so much pensive mysticism and so much love of life; such coarse crudeness and such tenderness of heart'. He concluded that all these inconsistencies might puzzle a foreigner, but not a true German: 'This is blood of our blood', Treitschke proclaimed, invoking the spirit of a sinister future, 'and the deep eyes of this genuine German farmer's son reflect old Germanic bravery which does not flee the world but tries to rule over it by the power of moral will'.

Even at the height of the celebrations in 1883, even at the culmination of Lutheromania, if I may coin this word, Luther was not a national hero accepted and worshiped throughout Germany. Before showing the role of Luther in American historical thought in the nineteenth century, let me pause to analyze why a substantial part of German society did not, and could not, identify with Luther. Catholic opposition to Luther has to be remembered first—which in the later course of the nineteenth century became better organized and more outspoken. The older Luther was praised. Ignaz von Döllinger, from 1826 Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Munich, reiterated that Luther had split Christianity, in his later years, when he had his own troubles with the Pope, acknowledging, however, fully Luther's genius and influence in Germany. Johannes Janssen, catholic historian and popular writer, in the 1870s stated the catholic position again, and more sharply than ever before. Luther had destroyed the rich religious and cultural life of the German people in the late Middle Ages, said Janssen—not granting that there had been disorders in the medieval church as earlier catholic romantic writers had done. Reacting to protestant attempts to give the Kaiserreich of 1871 the image of a protestant empire, Janssen insisted that Luther was basically a sick man, neurotic and morally inferior, and that his theology was, as a consequence, no better.

By 1883 catholic resistance against the Luther-cult was seconded by socialist writers. In his work on the German Peasants' War, first published in 1850, Friedrich Engels gave credit to Luther for having mounted the first Blitz, only to condemn Luther for having later sided with the Dukes and having betrayed the German people. For Engels, Luther's rival Thomas Müntzer was the true German revolutionary. Lassalle's view of him was somewhat more positive, while August Bebel and Karl Kautsky embellished Engels' negative interpretation. For Luther's fame it was also important that the new Kaiserreich had been unable to attract the admiration, and to earn the loyalty, of some intellectuals. The great Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt was one of them: he was afraid of revolution as much as of state omnipotence. Favouring Erasmus, he was repelled by Luther's violent polemics. Burckhardt's influence extended to Friedrich Nietzsche whose own biting criticism of Luther itself later influenced Thomas Mann. Nietzsche portrayed the late Middle Ages as an era of advancing enlightenment and secularization. In his eyes Luther had revived what had been doomed to die. He had brought new power to theology and to the churches, whose influence had been faltering, thus stopping the progress of civilization for almost three centuries. Depicting Luther as a great negative force in the history of mankind, Nietzsche totally reversed what Hegel and many others had proclaimed about him.

If Luther was never fully accepted by all Germans as a national hero, this was not only due to confessional division, to the new class division, or to the non-conformism of some intellectuals. Rather (if I may use the metaphor) the Luther monument itself stood on a very shaky basis. Indeed, in nineteenth-century Germany it offered a different picture from every angle. From the conservative side Luther looked like a man of law and order, having put down the revolutionary elements of his age. From the side of the liberals he seemed to be an ardent advocate of liberation and of freedom of thought, having shattered the scholastic repression of science and catholic intrigue against the free development of the German nation. For orthodox Lutherans he possessed all the qualities of a genuine Church-Father, having given them an
unadulterated faith and having brought discipline and proper obedience to their churches. For the Pietists, finally, Luther had the image of a zealously pious believer, urging all other Christians to be responsible in their faith and to engage in works of charity. It is obvious that these pictures did not match; it is equally important to note that the more one side pressed and propagated its view, the more it challenged the validity of the others. In order to see the full effect of this conflict we have to bear in mind that orthodox Lutherans and the Pietists were rivals for the leadership within the Protestant churches, just as the liberals and the conservatives were rivals in the political field. Luther’s legacy was, therefore, not quietly partitioned, each group grasping and idealizing an aspect of Luther for their own purpose; nor did the single views of Luther simply neutralize each other to make him a figure beyond party dispute, an unchallenged hero of all Germans. Rather, the liberal hero of Worms was contradicted by the conservative ideologist; and the Pietist young reformer was contradicted by the dominating figure of the church-father. As each party claimed to present the full and genuine Luther, all parties together, in effect, hindered a further propagation of the Luther myth.

2. Luther in Nineteenth-Century America
At the beginning of the new century, in the years around 1800, Americans knew little, if anything, about Luther. In the older Puritan tradition the reformation had been considered as a first step in the right direction with Luther as its leader. But the further the sixteenth century receded, the more insignificant this first step of religious renewal became. By the second half of the eighteenth century Luther was almost forgotten in England as well as in America. Moreover, the First Great Awakening reinforced not a more historical approach to religion but rather a kind of presentmindedness. The representatives of American enlightenment cared even less for the heritage of the sixteenth century. None of the Founding Fathers referred to Luther when explaining the political aims of the American Revolution; ‘the heroic models of classically educated gentlemen in the new American republic were drawn’, as a recent study on America’s Heroes states, ‘from the earlier republics of Greece and Rome’.

Within two generations a completely new situation evolved. In the decades from 1800 to 1840 more and more Americans recognized the importance of Luther’s legacy; in the decades from the 1840s to the Luther anniversary of 1883, furthermore, a growing number of Americans elevated Luther from an acceptable ancestor to one venerated and worshipped. What factors contributed, we have to ask, to this stranger career of the German reformer in America; what forces helped to incorporate him into the American national tradition? The first in America to discover Luther again were the Unitarians. After having established themselves as an independent religious group, they began to look for forerunners. It was in this context that they pointed to Luther as the liberator of thought—or at least as the one who had paved the way towards greater religious and (as some said) greater civil liberties. In the same period, also, the protestant groups which sprung from the Second Great Awakening (the Evangelical Protestants) made more and more use of Luther. To them the Reformation was the great revival of religion in the sixteenth century and Luther a forefather of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.

After the 1830s Luther was more and more often cited by the forces of anticatholicism in America. As the hostility against the growing number of catholic immigrants increased, Luther’s fight against the Pope was increasingly used to demonstrate what the Evangelical Protestants called the ‘corruptions of the Romish church’. ‘The present efforts, and to an alarming extent the success of the Romish church in this country render every thing which throws light upon its history and influence deeply interesting to the American christian and patriots’—these the words of a reviewer of a book on the reformation in the Quarterly Christian Spectator in 1833. Roman Catholicism, ‘this open foe of all our Protestantism, and this covert foe of all our civil rights, can be thoroughly undermined only on the historic field’, this in the inaugural address that the church historian Henry Boynton Smith delivered at Union Theological Seminary in 1851.

Aside from the protagonists of Nativism, after the 1830s and in the 1840s the members of the Transcendentalist movement did most to spread knowledge about Luther in America. Emerson and his friends were not as much impressed by Luther at the Diet of Worms as were many Unitarians. They did not praise the Luther who had burned the papal bull and unmasked Roman designs to govern the world whom Evangelical Protestants and nativists adored; but, writers themselves, the Transcendentalists were attracted by Luther’s productive mind and by his contributions to literature. It was Emerson and his friends who told the American people that Luther was a figure of universal importance. The small group of Lutherans in America had little influence in all of this. Although they were the only ones who observed the 300th
anniversary of 1517, they were divided: there were the followers of the enlightened and the followers of the revivalesene. They had no unified way of seeing Luther.

Between the 1840s and 1883, Luther's 400th birthday, the number of books and articles about Luther printed in America grew considerably, and American reference to him became even more favourable. Aside from the older forces (such as anticatholicism) that still had influence, some new ones contributed to this end. Above all the theologians teaching ecclesiastical history in American Divinity Schools should be mentioned. After 1844, when Philip Schaff came from Berlin to Mercersburg in Pennsylvania, more and more German scholarship on Luther and the German reformation was imported to America. Nearly all the leading church historians studied at one time in Germany, and all of them brought back a high appreciation of Luther. Secondly, as the publications of almost all denominations show, despite their divisions and quarrels, that from the 1850s to the 1870s the big American churches developed a protestant consensus on Luther's historical role. With variations of emphasis they all believed that Luther and the other reformers had renewed Christianity and had led the way to greater liberty, towards cultural as well as political progress. It was on the basis of the achievements and insights of Luther and the other reformers that they set out to build God's kingdom in America. For William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist movement Luther gained special significance as a symbol of courage against a world of enemies. In 1854 Wendell Phillips, friend of Garrison and famous orator for the antislavery cause, compared Garrison and Luther: 'Martin Luther was at a burning heat all his life', he wrote, 'and the white ashes have never yet covered the burning enthusiasm of Mr. Garrison'. Both Luther and Garrison served Phillips to point out that 'saints do not march in regiments, and martyrs do not travel in battalions; they come alone, once in an age'.

The American historians also played their part. Admittedly, neither Bancroft nor Motley wrote a biography of Luther or a history of the Reformation, but both included remarks about Luther in their works which demonstrate clearly that they thought of the Reformation as the first successful struggle for liberty in world history, followed by the revolt of the Netherlands, then by the English Revolution and, finally, by American independence. Nor did they have any doubt that Luther was the great leader of his time. In the tenth volume of his *History of the United States*, published in 1874, Bancroft wrote that at the end of the Middle Ages 'the earth, wrapped in thickest darkness, sighed for the dawn'. And then it was that Martin Luther 'kindled a light for the world' and 'struck superstition at the root'. According to Bancroft it was through him that 'Germany which appropriated no territory in America, gave to the colonies of New Netherland and New England their laws of being'. George Park Fisher, church historian at Yale, put the ideas of Bancroft and Motley in one sentence: 'The Reformation made the free Netherlands', he wrote in 1873, 'the Reformation made free England, or was an essential agent in this work; the Reformation made the free republic of America'. Two aspects are worth noting in this context. One is that in the 1870s and in the 1880s some American historians interpreted Luther's life and work with the help of the so-called germ theory. No longer was he called the German reformer, but rather the Teuton, or preferably the Saxon. The other interesting aspect is that after the late 1860s and in the 1870s some Americans from the North considered Prussia like a brother-nation. The Protestant Prussia had beaten the catholic Austrians and then the French in order to win the unification of Germany, just as they had beaten the South and saved the union of their republic. Both countries seemed congenial, both firmly Protestant and advancing civilization.

From the 1840s to 1883 American Lutherans again possessed little influence beyond their own parishes. Moreover they were fighting among themselves over the right interpretation of Luther's message, the 'Old Lutherans' (an orthodox group based on new immigrants) finally winning over the 'American Lutherans' (who represented the older Lutheran communities who were ready to give up some of Luther's teachings to achieve a closer union with the churches of puritan descent). Even so, the only group resisting completely the tide carrying Luther to fame in America were the American Catholics. Time and again they stressed the faults in Luther's character, trying to discredit his theology and to spread doubt among his followers; time and again they emphasized that Luther was an intransigent, a dangerous man, one who, for instance, had counselled Philip of Hesse to commit bigamy.

In 1883 Luther's 400th birthday was widely celebrated in America. Almost all the theological seminaries had special meetings, almost all religious journals (and some non-religious ones) printed special issues or articles devoted to Luther. Non-religious organizations like the Massachusetts Historical Society held special Luther ceremonies. With few exceptions speakers agreed that Luther, more than anyone else, had
laid the foundations of the modern world, resurrected the values on which America was built. To give some examples. Frederic Henry Hedge, friend of Emerson and powerful leader of the Unitarians, for many years Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the Harvard Divinity School, later Professor of German at Harvard College, also the translator of Luther's hymn 'Ein feste Burg'—Hedge, 78 in 1883, declared to the Massachusetts Historical Society: 'The dearest goods of our estate, civil independence, spiritual emancipation, individual scope, the large room, the unbound thought, the free pen, whatever is most characteristic of this New England of our inheritance, we owe the Saxon Reformed in whose name we are here today'. Such sentences are more than pure rhetoric; they contain deep and strong convictions. The Pennsylvanian senator, A.J. Herr, declared in 1883 that had Luther lived in 1776, 'his blood would have stained the snows of Valley Forge, with the rest of those immortal heroes'. The Lutherans erected a Luther statue in Washington, with much of the financial aid coming from non-Lutheran circles, and one Lutheran pastor remarked: 'If there had been no Luther in Germany, there would have been no Washington in America'. Of course, even in 1883 it was clear that America would not elevate Luther to the grandeur of a Washington. No Luther day was instituted (although the suggestion was made), and Luther was not declared a saint of American civil religion. But looking at the jubilee of 1883 one can say that he was widely worshipped as an ancestor of the New World. Aside from the American Catholics who held firm to their position, only some Baptists were critical of Luther and reminded their audiences that, after all, he had assisted in the persecution of their forefathers in the sixteenth century.

3. Luther in Twentieth-Century Germany and America
Let me sketch now, in a few words, the developments after 1883. No speaker at the anniversary foresaw what would happen: In America Luther's fame declined in the following decades. Again different forces must be distinguished: In the American Society of Church History, founded in 1888, church historians of all the major denominations (including Baptists and Catholics) cooperated. As a result, in the works produced by the members of this society Luther was, so to speak, put back into line. The achievements of the Reformation were attributed equally to him as to Zwingli, Calvin and Erasmus. The members of the American Historical Association, founded in 1884, cared even less for Luther—as far as I can see, not because they disliked him, but because they were primarily concerned with institutional and economic history. True, the 'New Historians', writing after the turn of the century, stressed religious history somewhat more; they refused, however, to grant to any single person the influence in the process of history that Luther had been given.

After the turn of the century Luther's reputation declined further as the leaders of the Social Gospel (the latest movement within American Protestantism) could not use him to advantage. Looking for answers to the problems of the new times—industrialization and urbanization—they found little in Luther's work. When America entered the war against Germany in 1917, Luther's reputation was almost ruined. As the celebrations in October 1917 show, what he retained lay purely in the religious and theological field; what lost, however, were those political and cultural attributes that had formerly accounted for his splendid career in America.

Since the end of the First World War, American interest in Luther has diminished, even among theologians. He is less often cited, and if cited, in a less favourable way. But even so, specialization in Luther research continues: Roland Bainton and others have produced a number of important studies on Luther, with the 'Society for Reformation Research' (founded in 1946) providing a forum for their discussions.

In Germany, by contrast, after 1883 the division between admirers and critics of Luther (not to speak of the division between the different groups of his admirers) remained almost unchanged. Around 1900 two catholic theologians, Heinrich Denifle and Hartmann Grisar, attacked Luther vehemently, concentrating even more than their predecessors on the immorality of his character, and deriving from there the invalidity of his teachings. In 1917 many Protestants came out again in praise of Luther, some of them invoking his name together with that of Hindenburg: God had sent the German people a saviour in time of deep trouble, they argued, in the early sixteenth century Luther—and now, in the crisis of the First World War, Hindenburg. In the 1920s, finally, among protestant German theologians a renewed interest in Luther's theology can be observed. Luther had till then been used—or rather misused—for political ends. Karl Holl, however, the leading figure in the 'Luther-Renaissance', came to the conclusion that he had been first of all a *homo religiosus*. In the following years this formula became very important: The conception of Luther as *homo religiosus* appealed to some younger catholic church historians, among them Hubert Jedln and Joseph Lortz. As a result, from the 1930s to the 1950s the catholic
view of Luther underwent a total revision and in the late 1950s and in the 1960s young Catholics, themselves anxious for reform, eagerly read Luther and to a degree even identified themselves with Luther the pious Catholic who had worked for reform but whose initiatives were blocked by the church authorities, and who was thus forced to leave the Church.

Where German Protestants are concerned, after 1933 they were split into those who saw in Hitler the true heir of Luther, and those who saw in Luther's teachings the best remedy against Nazism. As pamphlets in the allied war propaganda had made use of the slogan 'From Luther to Hitler' to characterize the German political tradition, leading German Protestants after 1945 laboured to free Luther from that dangerous connection and to establish him again as a figure within what they called the 'positive tradition' of Germany. Only a decade later, however, when these political implications were dying down, serious and productive Luther research was initiated.1

4. The Two Cases Compared
A comparison of Luther's career in nineteenth-century Germany and America reveals striking similarities and differences. In both countries the view of Luther depended to a considerable degree on religious and political developments. In Germany the deeply-entrenched antagonism of Catholicism and Protestantism for a long time stabilised Luther's historical role—loved and praised by some, hated and repudiated by others. Political arguments and confessional motives had top priority. Since the leading romantic writers were Catholics, moreover, the wave of romantic sentiment never really carried Luther. In America, on the other hand, where catholic influence for a long time was weak, a broad consensus on Luther was possible, limits to his grandeur for some time seemed not to exist. His standing was decided by non-Lutheran Protestants, and largely on non-confessional grounds, Luther being a hero in the battle between Protestant and Catholic. After 1883, however, relatively small considerations were enough to degrade this. He proves, I think, that the very Germanness which endeared him to German Protestants proved to be a serious obstacle in America. While German nationalism made unrestricted use of Luther, in America he could not be divorced from his being so very German. Nor could a larger number of Americans identify with Luther the Saxon and include him in their national tradition. By 1917 Americans no longer even praised him as a figure of universal importance.

5. Luther and the Nineteenth-Century Concept of a National Hero
When Luther was called a hero in nineteenth-century Germany and America, myth-building was of greater importance than scholarly research. In many counties Luther was called 'The Solitary Monk who Shook the World'. (This phrase, by the way, is taken from the Luther Anecdotes from which I quoted at the beginning.) The hero Luther had no helpers, we are made to believe, his post as Professor at the University of Wittenberg and as a Supervisor in his order are ignored, the protection given to him by the Saxon authorities is not mentioned. He was the upright and solitary monk who confronted the corruption of the Renaissance papacy. Another aspect of the Luther-myth was expressed by Carlyle who depicted Luther's parents as 'poor mine-labourers' and who went on to say that he found 'it altogether suitable to Luther's function in the Earth, and doubtless ordered to that end by the Providence presiding over him and us and all things, that he was born poor, and brought-up poor, one of the poorest of men'. 'What were all Emperors, Popes, and Potentates, in comparison', Carlyle asks, 'there was born here, once more, a Mighty Man; whose light was to flame as a beacon over long centuries and epochs of the world; the whole world and its history were waiting for this man. It is strange, it is great', Carlyle concluded, 'it leads us back to another Birth-hour, in a still meaner environment, Eighteen Hundred years ago'. Leaving aside the comparison between Luther and Jesus, which even at the height of nineteenth-century Lutheromania was not often drawn, Carlyle's description of Luther is typical in projecting archetypal configurations upon Luther's life. As if he was an ancient mythical hero, we are told about Luther's ordeal and exile, his exposure, destitution and humiliation before his rise as the charismatic saviour of his people. Patterns of mythical heroism are especially applied to his early years—the humiliation afflicted upon him by his harsh father, his exile, so to speak, in the monastery, and then the ordeals he had to go through as a monk.12

The metaphors used to describe Luther's heroic actions are, in general, part of the stereotype images of nineteenth-century national poetry. Even when Luther is compared to an Alpine mountain, as by Carlyle, we have to bear in mind that high mountains belong to the very centre of nineteenth-century Swiss, Austrian, and Norwegian national imagery.14 Carlyle's poetic achievement is not the creation of a new image, but rather the transfer, or metaphorical use, of an image well known in national poetry by 1840. It is surprising, therefore, that
Carlyle calls Luther’s parents ‘poor mine-labourers’. Treitschke, in contrast, is much more in tune with nineteenth-century national stereotypes when he speaks of Luther as a ‘genuine German farmer’s son’, thus suggesting simplicity of manners, purity of morals and cultural originality. By so describing Luther, Treitschke evokes in most of his readers the notion that Luther was made of the stuff that great heroes are made of. Especially in the decades between 1860 and 1900 and in popular tracts and popular magazines, Luther’s heroic stature was often modified by another trait. There the older Luther was shown as a genuine Bildungsbürger, loving music, the arts, and literature and being, above all, a devoted husband and father.

A typology of nineteenth-century national heroes does not exist. It is at present not possible, therefore, to assess the appeal of Luther to different social and cultural groups, to detail the elements of his fame and the means by which it was spread along with the appeal of other nineteenth-century heroes—such as Arminius, Barbarossa, and Frederick II in Germany, or Washington and Columbus in America, not to mention figures like the Swiss Tell or the Swede Gustav Adolfus, who also rank high among nineteenth-century heroes in Germany. As a contribution towards such a typology, let me outline some special features:

—Heroes had to step out of the dark, so to speak, and quickly rise to prominence as saviours of their people.
—They had to be young when they achieved their great deeds; they had to possess the radiating fascination of youthful strength.
—The myth connected with a hero’s life was greatly enhanced if he died young, preferably sacrificing his life for the cause for which he stood.
—There had to be heroic moments and heroic actions through which the hero’s entire impact could be conveyed in a compressed form. These heroic actions had the status both of fact and of symbol.
—A true hero had to change the course of history, ending by his deeds an age of corruption and shame and initiating an era of pride and glory.
—In the context of the nineteenth century it was especially important that this renewal was part of the national history. A true nineteenth-century national hero had to bring about a new line of development in his nation which led—or seemed to lead—from his own time to the present, thus enabling the nationally-minded to identify directly with his deeds.

—A hero’s fame was less vulnerable if he occupied a place outside party politics, beyond class struggle and beyond confessional disputes. Rather, it had to be part of his role to function as a force of harmony, bridging obvious gaps and uniting even those whose interests were clearly opposed.
—A hero’s fame was deepened and supported if his life was connected with a certain region which in itself could be idealized, the hero and the place of his actions complimenting each other in the eyes of posterity.
—He had to be a cultural figure, and this in a double sense: it was extremely valuable for his standing if he himself had accomplished works of cultural eminence; moreover, it was important that persons of high cultural rank—philosophers, writers, painters, sculptors, composers—praised the hero’s achievements.
—Finally, a true nineteenth-century hero had to have a special relation with supernatural forces which were considered to determine the destiny of the nation and of mankind. He did not have to be ‘himself divine or immortal’, but he had to have ‘a privileged relation with the supernatural’, like a vessel and agent of an absolute spirit that is working itself out in history. 13

It is obvious that Luther’s fame was not furthered by all of these characteristic traits to an equal degree. With regard to the first point, we can say that in many descriptions he is indeed depicted as if stepping out of the dark. The monastery is shown as providing a kind of cloud which covers the hero Luther while he resolves his thoughts and outlines his program. The monastery is the dark, then, out of which Luther rises like the morning sun. There are, however, clear limits to the use of this or similar metaphors, since nineteenth-century historians are convinced that the genetic principle offers most insight into a person’s development. Therefore Ranke, and many others, concern themselves with the early years of Luther much more than with his later life. In fact, most biographies of Luther are still totally unbalanced in this respect. They give long and detailed accounts of Luther before 1517, they fully describe his achievements between 1517 and 1525, but they add little with regard to the last twenty-one years of his life, from 1525 until 1546. The result of the nineteenth-century historians’ work could have been detrimental to Luther’s fame had Ranke and his contemporaries researched Luther’s early years critically. That was, however, not the case. The Luther myth was so strong, it seems, that his biographers filled his youth (about which very little is known) with
a series of anecdotes which show him in preparation for his later task. These anecdotes, therefore, perhaps added a new dimension to Luther's destination as a hero but did not shatter the myth.¹⁴ Nineteenth-century biographers of Luther, furthermore, conveniently ignored the fact that Luther was, by sixteenth-century standards, by no means a young man when he wrote and made public his theses. By calling him "the monk"—not the professor, or the district supervisor in his order—they preserved the mystique of the youthful hero. Never did they bring to the attention of their readers that the confrontation taking place in Worms in 1521 was between a middle-aged man of 38 years, Luther, and a splendidly young emperor of 21 years, Charles V.

Considering the matter of an ideal nineteenth-century hero's early death, there can be no doubt that it would have greatly promoted Luther hero-worship had he died in the years between 1521 and 1523, preferably in defense of his cause against pope or emperor. If that had been the case, Luther's resentful attacks against Erasmus, separating him from the most famous exponent of Humanism, would not have taken place; his tracts against the peasants would not have been written, separating him from the cause of the Common Man; and, to give another example, his split with Zwingli, separating him from reformed Protestantism, would not have occurred. There is, too, the long history of Luther after 1525—neither church-father nor martyr, but a man bypassed by history, complaining and censoring, endlessly boasting of what he had achieved and endlessly attacking others. All these diminishing elements could not be concealed in the nineteenth century; but the negative effects of these encounters could be—and were—effectively minimized by the concentration on Luther's career in the years shortly before and after 1521.

1521, then, the scene at Worms, as well as the picture of the Luther who nailed the theses to the door of the Wittenberg Schlosskirche, were the two great heroic events which nineteenth-century works on Luther portrayed time and again. These two actions demonstrated and symbolized all that Luther stood for. There were other, however, minor heroic events which were also recalled and which fitted only partially into the pictures of 1517 and 1521. While the picture of Luther burning the papal bull could be seen as another heroic act, as another symbolic gesture in his fight against the Pope, his dramatic return from the Wartburg to stop the progress of church reform in Wittenberg—as also his pamphlets against the peasants—carried a different message and were much harder to reconcile with his image as a national leader. It is quite understandable, therefore, that nineteenth-century critics of Luther made use of these events. The socialists recalled that Luther had betrayed the Common Man and sided with their oppressors in the decisive months of the peasants' revolt. The Baptists and some other non-Lutheran Protestants brought back to memory the fact that Luther had started the persecution of radical Protestantism.

Even the most ardent nineteenth-century critics of Luther conceded, however, that he had changed the course of history; even Catholics recognized him, like Carlyle, as a 'mighty man'. Luther admirers and Luther critics differed only in the evaluation of the changes he had caused, the one party denouncing them as destructive, the other praising them as the beginning of a new era. It is only in the past twenty years that Luther research has begun to show the real influence that other reformers had, as well as the extreme importance of the political protection given to Luther by the Saxon Elector, the so-called Lutherschutzpolitik.

As mentioned above, nineteenth-century German Protestants of all camps—liberals and conservatives, orthodox and Pietists—had no difficulty in placing Luther in the mainstream of German history and in attributing to him the crucial role of beginning the national revival of Germany. Luther's heritage demanded, they all agreed, nothing less than the completion of Germany's unification in the nineteenth century. It was this trait over which American admirers of Luther stumbled. Given all the traits of Luther hero-worship that linked him particularly with Germany and with German nationalism, he could not be made a figure of universal standing. It is a remarkable testimony to the strength of the nineteenth-century Luther cult, therefore, that he was acceptable as an American Founding Father to the extent that I have shown. And it is quite logical that in American national thought Luther was not shown as a German patriot, but given a role similar to Columbus, Gutenberg, or Erasmus, yet closer to American destiny.

In Germany, despite his role as a national hero, Luther was almost inevitably drawn into party conflict. This had not only the effect that the different groups of Luther admirers, by contradicting each other, limited the range of his fame; as pointed out earlier, it also meant that the confessional division, as well as the class conflict, worked against a further propagation of the Luther myth. In America, by contrast, Luther's astonishing reputation can be seen to arise from the fact that he was in the first instance a cultural hero, one whose heritage could not be claimed solely by one political party. And if Luther was used
in America for political ends—as he was extensively by the Nativists—his legacy tended to unite all Protestants, by far the largest part of nineteenth-century American population.

As Carlyle and many other nineteenth-century admirers of Luther believed, his fame was firmly linked with certain places in Germany, the Wartburg foremost, then Worms and Wittenberg. In nineteenth-century Germany Thuringen and Saxony, the homelands of Luther, were never considered, however, as an ideal and typical German landscape, as areas in which all national characteristics were embodied in a concentrated form. They never became what the Ueischweiz was for Switzerland. Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that Worms (for Luther admirers one of the two most important places in their hero's life) belongs to the Rhine region and was traditionally linked with medieval imperial glory. Perhaps it was also important that Thuringen and Saxony, being protestant regions, were totally unacceptable to German Catholics (particularly the Bavarians) as the holy arcadia of German nationalism. And finally we should not forget in this context that Thuringen and Saxony did not fit into the legend of the Hohenzollern dynasty, whose glory was linked with the cities of Nuernberg, Koenigsberg and Berlin, but not with the provincial towns in which Luther had lived.

If we examine Luther's role as a cultural hero, it is obvious that his own achievements in the field of literature greatly enhanced his fame among the nineteenth-century learned. The church hymns he had written were still sung and considered to be perfect examples of religious poetry; and his translation of the Bible was still in use and much admired as the beginning of modern German as a language. Again, even the most ardent among Luther's nineteenth-century foes admitted that he had shaped a chapter in the history of German culture and literature. On the other hand it is surprising to see that nineteenth-century dramatists produced no Luther drama. Schiller, Goethe, Kleist, Büchner, and Gerhart Hauptmann, to mention only the most influential playwrights, did not take up the Luther story as a suitable topic. Moreover, with the exception of the Worms Luther monument (which is artistically quite remarkable), the works by which Luther was commemorated were not executed by first-class artists. Looking back to nineteenth-century German Lutheromania we can observe, therefore, a discrepancy between the great number of Luther admirers and the meager quality of their achievements. While the extent to which Luther was used by the German national movement cannot be doubted, the artistic quality of nineteenth-century works in his honour exemplifies only too well the hollow nature of much of the praise. By contrast, Luther's nineteenth-century reputation as an instrument used by God was far-spread and no doubt in keeping with his fame as a hero. Since Luther had time and again spoken of himself as being guided in all his actions by Providence, he had set the tune for all those who wanted to see in him an agent of the supernatural.

In concluding, I should like to reiterate that Luther satisfied admirably some of the criteria for an ideal nineteenth-century national hero; his cultural achievements induced national pride in an age in which cultural nationalism ran high. Most Protestants could identify with his fight against the pope. The young Luther could inspire such different groups as liberals and Pietists. In an age of growing social tension the harmonious picture of Luther in the circle of his family gave comfort to a large segment of the German middle class. It is easy to see, therefore, how Luther became part of nineteenth-century German national mythology and even part of an anticatholic worldview in many Western countries. I should also like to stress, however, that the Luther myth permeated all parts of his life, those which fitted the role of an ideal nineteenth-century hero, just as much as those which did not (especially his origins, the long dark years of his youth and his life after the Peasants' War).

In all of this, myth and history were at odds in their perception of the man. In Germany, where the national worship of Luther came early in the nineteenth century, the national myth had to be totally perverted (as it was after 1933) before it started to die down and before scholarly research emancipated itself from the myth. In America—where the romantic veneration of Luther did not begin until the 1830s—scholarly views about Luther were already making themselves heard by 1900. In both countries, however, much of the myth persists. The celebration of Luther's 500th birthday in 1983 will be a unique opportunity for all of us to observe how much of the Luther-myth is still alive and to what degree critical Luther research has come into its own right.

3. No year but published, most probably, on the occasion of Luther's 400th birthday, 1883. The passage quoted is on p. 158.
7. Theodore P. Greene, America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Success in American
8. This and the following quotations are taken from my forthcoming book The
   Troublesome Ancestor: Martin Luther in American Historical Thought from the 19th to
   the early 20th centuries.
9. See my 'Kontinuität und Kategorisierung. Die Diskussion über Martin Luthers
   historische Bedeutung in den ersten Jahren nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg', Geschichte in
10. Ibid., pp. 137-8.
11. Ibid., pp. 116-17.
12. See Ernst Lewy, 'Historical Charismatic Leaders and Mythical Heroes', The Journal
   of Psychohistory, 6 (1979), pp. 377-92, who mentions Gandhi, Hitler, Malcolm X, and
   Herzl, but not Luther.
13. It seems to me false, therefore, to ask for 'die innere Wahrheit des Mythos' in the
   case of Luther (Johann Jakob Bachofen, 1869) or to use the 'Mythos als Quelle
   geschichtlicher Erkenntnis' (Bachofen, 1861, now in: Die Eröffnung des Zugangs zum
   Mythos, ed. Karl Kerényi, Darmstadt, 1967, pp. 121-6). Moreover, as the myth was
   carried into Luther's life, the insights of psychoanalysis can only be used to explain
   Luther's early development if one restricts oneself to the facts which are undisputably
   based on genuine sources, something which Erik H. Erikson in his famous study Young
   man Luther (London, 1959) does not always achieve, since he relies mainly on older
   protestant accounts when looking for 'facts' about the early Luther. On the other hand,
   Erikson depicted Luther as a man struggling with his own problems and with the
   problems of the world. Many Americans in the troubled late 1950s and 1960s could
   identify with such a Luther.
14. I owe this observation to the Scandinavian and Swiss participants of the conference
   on 'Myths and Heroes'.
15. Walter L. Reed, Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in
   Nineteenth Century Fiction (New Haven and New York, 1974), pp. 10 and 15. According
   to Reed, a Romantic hero is related to his admirers as 'an actor is to an audience', and
   he is also 'involved in a relationship to himself, that is, to his own heroic identity', to
   which he 'must live up, or decline from'. Both of these points seem to me to be derived
   from a too modern perspective.
16. Many of these anecdotes are based on casual remarks by Luther in his
   Tischgespräche, which thus appears as initiating, himself, much of the later myth.
17. A visit to the Wartburg belonged to the standard program of most foreign academics
   who came to Germany in the nineteenth century. Even Luther critics like Jakob
   Burckhardt could not help being impressed. The history of the Wartburg in the
   seventeenth century deserves further investigation.
18. See Cornelia Dinnitt Church, 'Myth and History as Complementary Modes of
   Consciousness', in Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness, ed. Lee W. Gibbs
19. Looking back at the last twenty-five years of Luther research we have to be grateful to
   Erwin Iserloh for having shown that Luther never posted the theses, thus demolishing
   the central piece of the myth (The Theses were never posted: Luther between Reform
   and Reformation, London, 1968). We have also to be grateful to Ernst Bizer for having
   detected that Luther did not possess a new theology prior to 1517, did not come to
   theological conclusions of his own until early in 1518, when he attempted to explain and
   defend his theses (Fides ex audito: Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der
   Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch die Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther, Neukirchen,