

Thomas A. Riley

**New England
Anarchism in Germany**

March 1945

John Henry Mackay (1864–1933) is almost invariably mentioned in histories of modern German literature as a characteristic figure of the rebellious 1880's and 1890's, a period in which German writers were struggling violently – and more or less successfully – to throw off the hampering blanket of idealism and to establish letters on the scientific basis of Darwinism and a materialistic philosophy.¹ The era produced such famous names as Hauptmann and Nietzsche, who shocked the German middle class by their supposedly immoral works and un-Christian, un-Godly attitudes. Mackay, who was probably the most rebellious of all the young rebels, went so far towards perdition as to become an anarchist, and to publish *Die Anarchisten* (1891) in which he preached anarchism as a mass movement to the German populace. One of his poems in *Sturm* (1888) praises atheism, another extols free love, and a third, entitled “Vaterland,” attempts to show the folly of love of country, while predictions of bloody wars and social revolutions in the twentieth century form the basis of long cycles of cantos. Critics of the time felt that with Mackay evil in literature had reached its nadir.

Mackay, a German through and through in spite of his Scottish name, appeared to have been influenced entirely by European social and intellectual forces.² The recent discovery in this country of two hundred and eighty-six original Mackay letters now reveals for the first time how much his thinking was dominated by intellectual currents which have their source deep in New England history and tradition.³ Mackay's best friend for more than forty years was the Massachusetts born-and-bred Benjamin R. Tucker (1854–1939); champion of American anarchism, a member of the Class of 1874 of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and for some time one of the editors of the *Boston Globe*.⁴ During those forty years, almost everything that Mackay wrote expressed directly or in sublimation an anarchism that cannot be discussed adequately without a consideration

¹ Mackay's work is cited by such representative historians as Soergel, Eloesser, Bithell, Meyer, Salzer, Engel, and Oehlke. Owing to the fact that Mackay covered his life with secrecy and published his later works himself (several under a pseudonym), these historians know little about him, and often that little is inaccurate. Professor Karl Viëtor, of Harvard University first called my attention to this mysterious figure in German literature.

² Mackay was brought up by his German mother and a German foster-father in Saarbrücken. His own father, a Scot, died when the baby was two years old.

³ Eighty of these letters were hidden away in the Labadie Collection of the University of Michigan; two hundred were found in a farmhouse in back-country Pennsylvania; and a half dozen turned up in Baltimore. The letters were made available to me by the kindness of Miss Agnes Inglis, of the University of Michigan; Mrs. Pearl Johnson Tucker, widow of Benjamin R. Tucker; and Mr. H.L. Mencken.

⁴ Cf. Charles A. Madison, “Benjamin Tucker, Anarchist,” in *The New England Quarterly*, XVI, 444–467 (September, 1943), and the autobiographical sketch in Ermanie Sachs, *The Terrible Siren: Virginia Woodhill* (New York, 1926).

of such “anti-government” Americans as the Quakers, the Abolitionists, Jefferson, Emerson, and Thoreau.⁵

Mackay went over to individualistic anarchism, of which Tucker was the leader, during 1888 and 1889, remaining true to this position long after Tucker’s retirement in 1908 and the death of the movement as such in the United States. As late as 1928 he issued a handsome edition of his collected works, composed largely of *Die Anarchisten* (1891) and *Der Freiheitsucher* (1921), both of which express essentially American thoughts and theories in the most artistic form that they ever received. The story behind these two books covers the life-time of an individual who remained faithful to his beliefs in spite of the scorn, amazement, bewilderment, and horror of his contemporaries.

The young, rebels who shocked the sense of decency of the middle-class Germans in the eighties and nineties are all either dead or very old, although now highly respected. Several of them⁶ in the past decade have published reminiscences of their times in which the strange figure of John Henry Mackay, forgotten by the present generation, is depicted as well known in the younger German literary circles of the *fin de siècle* not only as a propagandist, but also as a sensitive lyricist and novelist. Max Halbe, who had had no connection with Mackay for years, wrote in 1934:

In Mackay’s house [many years ago] at a small formal party I became acquainted with a young musician who had just come from Munich and who had put some of Mackay’s songs to music. They were sung on that evening, flattering the senses with their beauty, and reaching into one’s very soul. The young musician, who at that time was almost unknown, was Richard Strauss. Now, in June 1934, the whole intellectual world has just honored the seventy-year-old maestro as the greatest creative genius and interpreter of the emotions of our age. And certainly with justice. It may be that during those celebrations the old man remembered in some quiet moment those creations of his youth whose sweet melodies were written for the verse of a half-forgotten poet, one who should not be forgotten. The name of the musician now echoes through the world. The poet, dying in bitterness and misery, pushed aside, passed over, a man out of step with his times, rests in some corner of some Berlin cemetery, and few know his name, let alone his work.⁷

⁵ Cf. Eunice Schuster, *Native American Anarchism: A Study of Left-wing American Individualism* (Northampton, 1932).

⁶ Max Halbe, Gabriele Reuter, Rudolph Steiner, Stanislaus Przybyszewski, and Bruno Wille.

⁷ *Jahrhundertwende, Geschichte meines Lebens* (Danzig, 1935). 44. All translations of passages from the German in this essay were made by the writer.

The songs are Strauss's most famous ones: "Morgen" and "Heimliche Aufforderung." Schönberg and d'Albert have also composed music to Mackay's lyrics.

All "Who remember the Mackay of those two decades before he disappeared from public life — use the word *vornehm* in describing him. Of a well-to-do family, he traveled widely in France, Italy, and England (to the United States in 1893), and was in contact with all the progressive intellectual and social movements of the time. Although he universally gave the impression of good breeding, taste, softness, and amiability, he possessed a certain inner masculinity and strength. Under his polished demeanor he cherished a violent hate for the traditional Christianity and morality of Germany, a fear of the innate cruelty of churchgoers and people who considered themselves "good." His earliest poetry in the eighties, before he knew Tucker, is full of a Schopenhauerian *Weltschmerz* and a longing for death as an escape from the evil of life. His adoption of anarchism was clearly an attempt to find a weapon with which to combat his greatest fear, life itself. Among the anarchistic leaders of those days were many highly educated men, some of noble families: Kropotkin, Bakunin, Malatesta, Cafiero, and Reclus. Mackay was not entirely out of place when at the age of twenty-three he came to London and settled down for a year among the anarchistic political exiles, the most notorious names in Europe, banned by police from every Continental capital. These communist-anarchists felt that the only salvation of mankind lay in a communal holding of property in a stateless society to be brought about by a revolution of the masses. Johann Most brought these ideas in a somewhat primitive form to New York from London in 1882 and spread them throughout the radical Germans in America.

In Benjamin R. Tucker, American anarchism found an organizer and advocate, but one who believed in private ownership and non-violence, in contrast to its European cousin, represented by such agitators as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. The European form was famous and noisy, with murders in every country laid at its door; the American brand was quiet, unsensational, and known only among a few hundred followers. Tucker always denied the right of Europeans to call themselves anarchists, for to him they were but communists, revolutionary communists. Individualism, according to Tucker, did not admit of the compulsory holding of property in common with others; an anarchist was in essence an individualist with the right to possess any property his labor has produced or that has come to him through inheritance or gift.⁸ In his belief that all government built on armies and police systems could be done away with by non-violent means,

⁸ The best summary of Tucker's theories may be found in *State Socialism and Anarchism*. Cf. his *Instead of a Book, by a man too Busy to Write One: A Fragmentary Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism* (New York, 1893).

Tucker felt himself completely within the American tradition, and pointed proudly to Josiah Warren, the original American anarchist, and to his own profoundly American background and that of most of his followers.

In the 1880's American ultra radical movements — socialism as well as anarchism — were to a large extent supported by a small group of German immigrants. Not until the nineties did communist-anarchism pass over into the hands of the Russians associated with Emma Goldman.⁹ Since these Germans were so deeply interested in untraditional forms of political thought and Tucker wished to rescue them from communist-anarchism, he made an attempt in 1888 to reach them by a German edition of his journal *Liberty*. He called to Boston as editor of the venture a young man named George Schumm (1856–1941),¹⁰ American-born son of German parents, who wrote equally well in German or English and who had been already active in liberal politics in the Middle West. The project would have been a complete failure, the nine numbers issued during 1888 showing that there was not enough interest among Germans to pay for the publication, if it had not been for the fact that it was the German *Libertas* that, by chance fell into the hands of John Henry Mackay in London and made him Tucker's convert.¹¹ Tucker and Mackay met in Paris the next year, in 1889, for the first time.

Mackay was a poet through and through, with a poet's nature. Since he was no organizer and refused to give speeches, the spread of propaganda for individualistic anarchism had to be arranged by other men. Bernhard Zack, Mackay's publisher after 1908, was active for a while in forming clubs and arranging for speakers and discussion evenings. He even put out a journal for a few numbers. Otherwise, there was little organized activity among the people interested in the movement, for the whole philosophy of individualistic anarchism, while not opposed to the formation of clubs and parties, nevertheless did not encourage them. Some measure of the public interest in the movement is indicated by the sale of Mackay's books. By 1903, *Die Anarchisten* had sold sixty-five hundred copies in Germany, and by 1911, about eight thousand. Its final sale by the time of Mackay's death in 1933 was over fifteen thousand. In 1922, when he reissued Tucker's pamphlet *State Socialism and Anarchism* in a new German edition, he had by January of that year already thirty-five hundred copies subscribed for, according to his letter to Tucker on January 2. Rudolf Rocker, himself a communist-anarchist, wrote, in German, in 1927:

⁹ Rudolf Rocker, *Johann Most: Das Leben eines Rebellen* (Berlin, 1924), 375.

¹⁰ The Mackay correspondence at the University of Michigan Library is almost all addressed to George Schumm. It runs from 1891 to 1933. Schumm, Tucker, and Mackay remained close friends all their lives.

¹¹ Letter from Mackay to Schumm, November 14, 1891.

Those comrades who had known the underground period of the movement [1878–1890] were without exception followers of Communist-Anarchism. They knew nothing of any other form. Then there appeared in Zurich in 1891 J. H. Mackay's novel "Die Anarchisten," which excited considerable attention in Anarchist circles of Germany although the theoretical bases are extremely weak and open to criticism. In the meetings and discussion groups there were now endless quarrels over the question: Communistic or Individualistic Anarchism? And not a few came to the decision that individualism incorporated in itself the real basic ideas of Anarchism.¹²

During the years from 1895 to 1922, Mackay issued a series of eight propaganda pamphlets in German, for the most part translations of Tucker's articles made mostly by himself or by Schumm. Five of these *Staatssozialismus und Anarchismus* (1895), *Sind Anarchisten Mörder?* (1899), *Der Staat und das Individuum* (1899), *Was ist Sozialismus?* (1902), *Die Stellung des Anarchismus zur Trustfrage* (1911), were written by Tucker and a sixth, *Die Frauenfrage* (1899), by two of Tucker's associates. All together he distributed about forty-three thousand of these, no doubt to a large extent at his own expense.

If Mackay was Tucker's greatest convert, Mackay's greatest was Rudolf Steiner, Goethe scholar, mystic, and theosophist, now known throughout the world as the leading spirit of anthroposophy. Steiner's important work, *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (Berlin, 1894), first brought the two together; but as Steiner became a mystic the friendship between the two cooled, for Mackay, although deeply emotional, was also thoroughly materialistic. Nevertheless, Steiner never forgot his former friend but mentioned him frequently in later years as a great poet and personality.¹³ In 1898, a few weeks after the assassination of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria by an alleged anarchist, when mobs were shouting for the blood of all who called themselves anarchists, Steiner horrified the good readers of *Das Magazin für Literatur*, which he was editing at the time, by publishing an exchange of letters between John Henry Mackay and himself, in which he said: "If, in the sense in which such things can be decided, I should say whether the term Individualistic Anarchist is applicable to me, then I should have to answer in the affirmative."¹⁴ It was an attempt by Steiner — a hopeless one, of course — to rescue American anarchism from the inevitable confusion with its cousin of bad reputation, communist-anarchism.

Hardly any book or article on another German of a quite different character, the egoist Max Stirner, fails to mention John Henry Mackay as Stirner's discoverer

¹² *Johann Most*, 383.

¹³ See, for instance, Rudolf Steiner, *Mein Lebensgang* (Dornach, 1925), 260.

¹⁴ *Magazin für Litteratur*, September 30, 1898.

and biographer.¹⁵ But Tucker's part in the discovery of this writer's one book, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844), is never mentioned, although in actuality Tucker knew Stirner's work long before Mackay did. When Mackay first became acquainted with American anarchism, it had already incorporated in itself Stirner's ethical code of absolute egoism in place of Christian altruism, at a time when Germany was almost completely unaware of this egg of its own laying.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Mackay was almost alone instrumental in the later popularization of Stirner's book, which eventually created wide interest, with eighteen translations in the fifteen years immediately following the appearance of Mackay's biography. Stirner's ethical attitudes are omnipresent in everything Mackay wrote after 1890, just as they form the basis for much of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

Mackay's real contribution to individualistic anarchism lies however, primarily in the two semi-novels *Die Anarchisten* and *Der Freiheitsucher*. He himself always referred to these two books, along with the largely communist-anarchist *Sturm*, as propaganda, in contrast to his other poems, novels, and short stories, which were expressions of pure art. The fact is that these three books do contain detailed programs for a political and social movement while his other works are anarchistic only in the very wide sense that they are the expression of a sensitive poet's yearning for a life of absolute individualism. If the critic wishes to keep Mackay's own division, he must admit at once that Mackay's two propaganda novels are of an extremely high quality, especially *Der Freiheitsucher*. Mackay, in spite of his old-fashioned tendency to look down on mere propaganda, felt that the latter was the most important work that he ever produced, superior to his non-propaganda novel, *Der Schwimmer*.

In *Die Anarchisten* there are two contrasting characters, one of which represents a philosophy of life that is clearly communist-anarchism; the other, a more intellectual person, is an individualistic anarchist and an egoist. Through the eyes of these two men we see the horrors of life among the London poor in 1887 and the useless attempts of London radicals to wipe out the evils of the world by means of an effective social movement. Only by individualism *à la* Tucker and egoism *à la* Max Stirner can the world progress out of the misery, poverty, and wars produced by governments. The book is obviously aimed not only at the layman but also at the communist-anarchists, in an attempt to persuade them to drop their evil ways and come over to the camp of the Americans. It was translated into English by George Schumm immediately after its appearance and

¹⁵ See the articles on Anarchism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and on Max Stirner in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, or in *The Americana*.

¹⁶ See *Liberty*, Tucker's anarchist journal, May 7, June 22, March 12, March 16, and August 27, 1887. This was before Tucker knew Mackay, and before Mackay had heard of Max Stirner.

published by Tucker in Boston. Subsequently it has been translated into six other languages and has sold slowly but unceasingly from the time of its origin to 1933, the most wide-spread and best-known of all Mackay's books.

Der Freiheitsucher is very different from *Die Anarchisten*. In the center of the latter, Mackay put the London anarchists in mass, and all through it he dealt with crowds: street crowds, unemployed demonstrations, mobs, and political assemblies. Now, in its companion book, he wished to show the mental and emotional development of a lone individual from childhood to a mature belief in the possibility of a world in which no one is forced to submit to unwanted government, a world in which everyone works out his own system of ethics without respect to laws and believes in his own God. It was written during the four years of World War I, its publication held up by the ensuing economic distress until 1921, and the costs met then by the sale of his last piece of property, his summer place in Silesia, "Das Haus zur Freiheit." Within a few months the inflation swept away every source of income he had left, except for his stores of unsold and for the most part unsalable books.

In the main the story of *Der Freiheitsucher* is that of Mackay's own life: his stern foster father, his loving, idolized mother, a rebellious child, school, university, important stays in London and Switzerland, long friendship with a non-German anarchist, a womanless life, a brooding life, filled with attempts to fathom its meaning and to find solutions for its evils. More than half the book is devoted to the main character's discoveries in the realm of thought: his gradual realization that governments are the causes of mankind's troubles, and the solutions, the sudden dawning on him that he must be an anarchist to think thus. The outline of American anarchism given in *Die Anarchisten* in conversations among the various characters is here filled out in detailed essays to a complete *Weltanschauung* covering all phases of life. Of course, only the basic points are taken over from American anarchism; Mackay builds on this foundation a house of his own, German and not American, Mackay and not Tucker.

To readers whose sympathies were already anti-state, anti-communistic, and anti-revolutionary, the book presented a beautiful expression of their views. Thoreau would have delighted in it. Indeed, American anarchism has in existence today a well-rounded body of literature produced by Josiah Warren, the founder; Benjamin Tucker, organizer and popularizer; Max Stirner, moralist; Pierre Proudhon, social theorist; and greatest of them all, the poet and artist, the synthesist, John Henry Mackay. In this literature is the mentality of a movement, a head whose body has disappeared into the air, as strange a sight as Alice's cat or Morgenstern's house of space.

Der Freiheitsucher is an anomaly in literature, for it is the acme of an American movement, reached not in America but in a foreign country and in a foreign

language after the original movement had died out. Mackay was the greatest convert of American anarchism and its most stubborn adherent. He was in a way a genius, talented in the field of letters as none other of the many shrewd heads Benjamin Tucker attracted to his cause. For over thirty years the basic principles of the Americans, which included the egoism of Max Stirner, glowed in his intellect and emotions until he cast them in a master form, one that Tucker, Schumm, Robinson, Yarros, Walker, or Byington could never have achieved, in a flow of language that their English was never capable of.

The book met with scarcely a mention or a review in the German press, even among the radical publications. *Die Anarchisten* had made Mackay famous; *Der Freiheitsucher* brought him almost to beggary.

The mere fact that *Der Freiheitsucher* was never translated into English shows how the American movement had disintegrated. Mackay wrote Schumm, in German, on October 20, 1921:

It is completely incomprehensible to me that my new book, by far the most important thing that I have ever written and my true life's work, should be such a complete failure over there. And all the more incomprehensible when one remembers that you can have it for almost nothing, for about thirty cents according to the present state of the mark. And is there no one who is willing to take on a number and sell them with a profit to himself? Is the German social movement dead? Are there no German [radical] periodicals published over there any more?

In spite of the hopelessness of marketing a German book in this country in the early 1920s, George Schumm took over the task of selling it in the East; Clarence Swartz and Henry Cohen of Los Angeles, old-time supporters of Tucker, took the West, only to find that their greatest and most self-sacrificing efforts brought almost no results. With the mark fluctuating giddily and climbing to awful heights, Mackay soon saw hunger very close to him, so close that in desperation he offered a new plan to the three Americans. In order to get a steady flow of money from America, the dream of all Germans during the inflation years, he suggested persuading a small group of Americans interested in anarchism, Tucker-followers of former days, to buy regularly each month a dollar's worth of his books, any of his books. His three friends redoubled their efforts and during 1922 were able to send to Berlin a few hundred dollars from about twenty different persons, for which Mackay returned several hundred dollars worth of his books, the exchange being very favorable to the Americans.

Refusing with the greatest vehemence all outright gifts from Tucker, who had been living with his wife and child in France since 1908, Mackay then struggled

through the next few years by selling everything he had of value: the fifteen hundred volumes of his library, his antique furniture, his collection of letters from all famous German writers, and that which caused him the most pain, his unique collection of Stirner books and documents. A new edition of the undying, *Anarchisten* came at just the right moment, too. They were unhappy years, but he survived them without having to accept charity. Then in 1926 a strange fate befell him.

When Tucker, in a letter to the New York *Tribune* in 1898, named the various kinds of people who were anarchists (non-communistic, American anarchists) he mentioned that one or two millionaires were adherents to the cause.¹⁷ Their identity is uncertain, but at least one wealthy manufacturer who for several years paid \$500 for his subscription to *Liberty* was Henry Bool of Ithaca, New York. He stood very close to Tucker until the latter's retirement to France, whereupon he also retired to England.¹⁸ In *Der Freiheitsucher* in 1921 Mackay makes a plea for more financial support of anarchism by men of wealth, especially millionaires.¹⁹ In 1926 his plea was suddenly answered; a millionaire came to his rescue. It was like a fairy tale, a dream of a hungry man, that into the misery that surrounded Mackay's last years, recognition and reward should suddenly be thrust. Michael Davidovsky, a wealthy Russian living in France, interested for years in Mackay, Stirner, and American anarchism, first supplied the means for setting up a Stirner Publishing House in Berlin and then made provision for Mackay's receiving a monthly pension. Mackay saw before him a carefree old age, in which he could devote himself entirely to new projects.

His plans as a result of Davidovsky's support entailed an "International Radical Publishing House," which would issue first of all his own works, then a three-volume edition of Max Stirner, and finally Tucker's most important writings in German translation. In the summer of 1927 he came on to Monte Carlo to visit the Tuckers for the first time in many years, all happiness and all confidence, but the official papers were not yet all signed. In November, after his return to Berlin, a bit of doubt began to appear in his letters to Tucker. In February 1928, he wrote: "Our millionaire does not pay. I put the last I had in the Stirner Verlag and now we are dependent on the sale. But the book is splendid, one of the finest editions ever made in Germany. . . ."

The book he refers to is his *Werke in einem Band*, the crown of his life's work and the crown of American anarchism, a beautiful thin-paper edition of over a thousand pages, a delight to any book lover, containing, besides his most important

¹⁷ "Are Anarchists Thugs?" November 27, 1898

¹⁸ Schuster, 155.

¹⁹ *Werke in einem Band*, 1159.

poetry, stories, and novels, also the two Tucker books: *Die Anarchisten* and *Der Freiheitsucher*. Thus far did he realize his dreams and no farther. The millionaire refused to pay any more. Gone were the Stirner edition, the Tucker edition, the monthly stipend; he almost lost the rights to the *Werke in einem Band* through a lawsuit with a former friend who had assisted him in the editing. If he could have sold his new creation, it would have given him financial relief, but with no money for advertising he could not move it. One letter in 1929 mentions the selling of six copies in three months.

Defeated again and deeply unhappy, Mackay turned back to the former scratching for a living to which he had been compelled before the appearance of a Maecenas, but he scratched for much more than a living now. With fear of death's overtaking him before his work was done, he sought for more than a bit to eat; as much as life itself he wished to publish his last words to the German people, — words that no newspaper, magazine, or publishing house would accept. After an attempt to raise money from friends to put out the Stirner books had failed, he instituted in March 1931, a Mackay-Gesellschaft, the main purpose of which was to finance entirely new books, and surprisingly enough he was able to publish two tiny ones that winter before the plan collapsed. Then during the summer of 1932 someone in America gave him the money to publish what turned out to be his last book, the deeply moving *Abrechnung, Randbemerkungen zu Leben und Arbeit*, in three thousand copies, autobiographical, the summary of a lonely, bitter fight of nearly seventy years, his attempt to turn back the German political, social, and moral tide to an exaggerated individualism, far beyond anything Goethe and his individualistic age had ever conceived. Only today can we comprehend the enormous irony in his self-imposed task.

He died on May 16, 1933, soon after the Nazi "assumption of power," according to the letter an English-writing friend of Mackay's wrote to Tucker. In his will he stipulated that all his manuscripts and correspondence were to be destroyed, and a recently made convert to individualistic anarchism, who had loaned him some rather large sums, was to be appointed heir to his unsold books. The correspondent wrote to Tucker:

On the evening of Sat. the 20th May we had a little funeral at Wilmersdorf near Berlin. As he had wished, no word was spoken, we were only five persons. But the organ played pieces of Bach and Händel, a woman sang his "Ich ging an deinem Haus vorüber . . ." with accompaniment of organ and violin after the composition of d'Albert . . . The ashes are deposited in a churchyard at Stahnsdorf, a stone with the name will there be laid on the place . . .

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
January 7, 2013



Thomas A. Riley
New England Anarchism in Germany
March 1945

From *New England Quarterly*, Volume XVIII, (March 1945)
Retrieved on January 6, 2013 from <http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/tariley.html>