

Rare letter from William Owen reveals connections with European nobility

In the May edition of the newsletter, we celebrated some anniversaries in 2017, one of which was 200 years since the opening of Robert Owen's school, at a time that he was not only studying the work of leading educationalists but was also contemplating the secondary education of his children. Following his visit to Hofwyl, the school in Switzerland run by Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg, which we recounted in May, he sent his two older sons, Robert and William, to von Fellenberg's school.

Born in 1802, William was Owen's second son. He was therefore 20 years old when he wrote the letter in question, acquired recently by Graham U'ren, secretary of the Friends of New Lanark. Dated 19 April 1822 and written at New Lanark (by then, the Owen family home had been Braxfield House for about 14 years since the death of Justice Robert McQueen) the letter was written in fluent German to a younger colleague at the school, Alfred von Neipperg, seeking news from the school, its pupils and teachers, since Owen had left.

He apologised for not writing sooner as he and his brothers had been preoccupied with making copies of their father's next report (probably "Permanent Relief for the British Agricultural and manufacturing Labourers and the Irish Peasantry" which was eventually published in 1823). Clearly such publications and their dissemination were projects which engaged the whole family. "We always had to write late into the night" states William. "On top of this came the departure of my father for London, leaving so many tasks for us."

William's comments to Neipperg were revealing about not only the enlightened education at Hofwyl but about the community spirit, something that Robert, his father, clearly approved of. He wrote of the formality of elections of pupils to representative positions and referred to some by numbers rather than names, but there was also clearly great camaraderie, which he missed – "I would like to be able to hold assemblies like yours here (in New Lanark) but good company, as we had it with each other at Hofwyl, cannot be found here."

Despite the use of German for the text of the letter to his German friend, the letter front is addressed in French to Monsieur G-Comte A de Neipperg, chez M de Fellenberg, Hofwyl, près de Berne, en Suisse. Alfred's title came from being the eldest of four sons of the first marriage of Count Adam Adalbert von Neipperg (1775 –1829), an Austrian general and statesman and the son of a diplomat famous for inventing the forerunner of the typewriter. Count von Neipperg's fiefdom was the County of Neipperg centered on Schwaigern in Germany and he had distinguished himself leading divisions of the Austrian army against the Napoleonic forces.

More famously, however, he seduced Napoleon's second wife, Marie Louise, while Napoleon was in exile on Elba. With the encouragement of her father, Emperor Francis I of Austria, Neipperg discouraged Marie Louise from joining her husband in exile and eventually succeeded in extinguishing her loyalty towards Napoleon. By then von Neipperg's first wife had died in 1815 and he had three further children with Marie Louise, step siblings for Alfred. He then quietly married her after Napoleon's death and, following the restructuring of post-Napoleonic Europe, the Congress of Vienna made Marie Louise the Duchess of Parma where together they proved to be relatively popular governors.

Alfred succeeded to his father's title on his death in 1829. He married twice, the second time to Princess Marie, daughter of King William I of Württemberg but died childless in 1865. His brother Erwin (1813–1897) assumed the title after him and the heirs of this senior line of counts still live at Schwaigern.



Neipperg Coat of Arms



William Owen (attributed to David Dale Owen)

William himself later emigrated to New Harmony with his siblings but was not to go on to such an eminent career as his three brothers, Robert (US senator and first director of the Smithsonian Institute), David (Head of US Geological Survey) and Richard (US army colonel and university principal). However, he was well educated at Hofwyl and supported his father in the negotiations for the purchase of New Harmony and its promotion with the greatest intellectuals and highest authorities, including President-elect John Quincy Adams. His only significant written work was his diary of their tour of Philadelphia and the eastern cities of American prior to taking over New Harmony from George Rapp and his followers. He died in 1842 at the relatively early age of 40.