

SOCIALISM, DEMOCRACY AND REFORM: A LETTER AND AN ARTICLE BY GEORGE H. MEAD

Dmitri N. Shalin*

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

This article is intended to serve two purposes by presenting a selection from George Herbert Mead's correspondence with Henry Northrup Castle and his little-known series of five articles on the issues of war and democracy. This presentation should renew an interest in Mead's political writings and reform activities. It should also draw the attention of sociologists to the substantial body of unexplored, unpublished writings, which will hopefully continue to be investigated.

Although the philosophical and sociological works of George Herbert Mead have been under close scrutiny for decades, his political writings and engagements have begun to attract attention only in recent years. Reasons for this neglect are many. For one thing, many of Mead's relevant publications appeared in little-known magazines, small circulation pamphlets, or were buried in newspapers. Some important political writings of Mead have never been published and are available only in manuscript form in the archives of the University of Chicago. Contemporary readers, I may add, rarely go to the original sources where Mead's articles were first published, relying instead on a volume edited by Reck (1964). Yet, some of Mead's papers reprinted in this edition appear there in an abbreviated form, often with Mead's political discussions being the first casualty. Largely unexplored, also,

*Direct all correspondence to: Dmitri Shalin, Department of Sociology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901.

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remains a rich collection of Mead's correspondence gathered in the archives of the University of Chicago, which offers perhaps the most important insight into Mead's political thinking, particularly in the earlier years of his intellectual career.

The publication of the following selection from Mead's correspondence and one of his little-known articles is designed to serve a twofold purpose. It may help to rekindle interest in Mead's political writings and reform activities, which had direct bearing on his substantive ideas. It should also draw the attention of sociologists interested in Mead to a substantial corpus of Mead's unpublished writings, which are yet to be fully explored. These materials are of special interest because they cast light on Mead's life-long interest in socialism and reform. A few preliminary remarks on the selections and its historical significance might be useful.

The first set of materials is excerpted from Mead's correspondence with Henry Northrup Castle. Mead and Castle met at Oberlin College where they formed a close friendship that lasted until Henry's early death in 1895. A descendant of Christian missionaries in Hawaii and a son of wealthy parents from Honolulu, Castle shared with Mead a heightened moral sensitivity, keen interest in philosophical speculations, and skepticism about the veracity of church dogma. A teacher of Henry's described him as one of the two most brilliant students he had encountered at Oberlin (Barnard 1969, p. 48). By all indications, the impact of Castle on Mead's intellectual development was considerable. It was Castle who reinforced Mead's doubts about the ministry as a vocation, persuaded Mead to join him at Harvard, offered Mead financial assistance during his studies in Germany, and was instrumental in channeling Mead's early evangelical zeal into progressive reforms. It is also worth noting that through Castle's sister, Helen, whom Mead married in 1891, Mead inherited part of the Castle family's fortune, which assured him a comfortable existence for the rest of his life.

Early letters of Mead to Castle reveal the personal crisis that Mead underwent after his graduation from Oberlin College. At this time, Mead was torn between his desire to improve the world through Christian works and his interest in literary and philosophical studies. The strong evangelical leanings that Mead inherited from his parents were checked by his growing doubt and skepticism spurred by the Darwinian theory of evolution. A secular career did not have much appeal to Mead either, because it could not provide a sufficient outlet for his burning desire to alleviate the ills of society and to work directly for humanity. For a long time Mead remained uncertain about his career. His doubts about the future were reinforced by unpleasant employment experiences. Mead tried his hand, without much success, at teaching and tutoring. For several years he worked as a member of the surveying crew for the Wisconsin Central Railroad Company, having a home base first at St. Paul and then at Minneapolis. This last experience left Mead with particularly bad memories. The drinking habits of his manager, coupled with his inability to pursue his readings, made Mead long for an escape. In 1887, yielding to Henry's urging, Mead enrolled in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University, where he chose to study physiological psychology. Mead's overriding desire to serve people, however, was too strong, and it soon reasserted itself in the form of his keen interest in socialism and progressive reform.

In the Fall of 1888 Mead went to Germany to continue his studies toward the doctoral degree. He never completed his Ph.D., and one reason for this failure might

well have been his preoccupation with the socialist movement on the continent and his thoughts about entering politics and joining the reform movement. The letter to Castle was written by Mead during his stay in Berlin in August of 1890. It conveys Mead's fascination with socialism and the prospects of reform in America. Mead writes about "opening toward all that is uplifting and satisfying in socialism," deplors the U.S. government which "in ideas and methods belongs so to the past," and declares his determination "to go into a reform movement." Mead urges his friend to join him in his efforts and lays out a plan, which includes buying out the *Minneapolis Tribune*, getting into city politics, and revitalizing the political climate in the states. Mead's political leanings of this period bear imprint of social democratic ideas. They also show some resemblance to the views of Christian socialists and the followers of Edward Bellamy, the author of the utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, which served as a rallying point for the members of the Nationalist Club. The concluding section of the letter is a moving testimony to the intimate relationship between Mead and Castle. Mead tries to console his friend, who had recently lost his wife, arguing that Henry should not withdraw from the world, that the best way for him to overcome his grief is by working for humanity.

Henry Castle shared Mead's view of the importance of socialism in Europe and of the need for reform in America. In one of his letters from Germany Castle ([1894] 1902, p. 784) wrote to his parents about socialism in terms indicative of his and Mead's attitudes of this period: "The importance of social democracy here is tremendous, but not in the least alarming. It simply stands as a protest against the existing conditions, not merely on their economical but also on their political side. The leaders are men of brains and education, whose influence is on the side of the general democratic movement after all, and as such useful and necessary." Being a more practical man than Mead, however, Castle remained skeptical about the feasibility of Mead's plans and apparently declined to join the venture. All this did not dampen Mead's enthusiasm for socialism and reform. Even after his appointment as an instructor at the University of Michigan he remained interested in practical politics, as indicated, for instance, by his enthusiastic support for a socialist weekly that he and John Dewey contemplated for a while (Mead Papers, Mead to Castle, February 28, 1892, b1, f3; Raushenbusch 1979, pp. 18–21). This interest came to the fore in the first explicitly political works published by Mead (1899a,b), where he stated in no uncertain terms that "Socialism, in one form or another, lies back of the thought directing and inspiring reform" (Mead 1899a, p. 367), and it remained undiminished throughout Mead's entire intellectual career.

The letter of Mead to Castle did not survive in its original form. It has two parts: One, dated August 1890, is available only in the form of a typescript, which was in all probability made by Mead's daughter-in-law, Irene Tufts Mead, who donated Mead-Castle correspondence to the University of Chicago archives; another, dated 19/10/1890, is available in a holograph. These documents were until now considered as two separate letters, surviving only as fragments. There is good reason to believe, though, that the two documents are parts of the same letter. The typescript marked "Aug. '90." begins in the middle of the sentence, which seems to be a continuation of the last, unfinished sentence of the letter dated 19/10/1890. Whether or not my supposition is correct, and we are indeed dealing with the same letter, there is a clear thematical continuity between the two fragments, and they must be considered in conjunction.

The second item is Mead's article "Democracy's Issues in the World War." It was published on August 4, 1917, in *The Chicago Herald*. It is one of the little-known series of five articles on the issues of war and democracy published by Mead between July 26 and August 4 of 1917 in *The Chicago Herald* (Mead, 1917a,b,c,d,e; see Berger and Deegan 1981 for further details on this series). What makes this article particularly interesting is Mead's remarks on socialism. Mead recognized the role socialism played in the "popular struggle against governments which have been in the hands of privileged classes." He hailed the outbreak of the February Revolution in Russia, the outcome of which he was prepared to wait for "with patience and profound sympathy." At the same time he took socialists to task for what he thought was their inability to take "the democratic attitude of the community as a whole," for their abandoning of the internationalist stance on the question of armistice, and for their refusal to endorse the idea of the League of Nations.

The documents in this article give a fair idea of the change that Mead's attitude toward socialism underwent over the course of years. His early pronouncements were full of enthusiasm for socialism, as he found it on the continent, particularly in Germany. His statements on the subject grew more ambivalent when he moved into academe. At the time Mead established himself in Chicago, he repudiated what he called the "utopian" and "programmist" versions of socialism, juxtaposing to them the progressive orientation of social reformers. "The socialists are becoming opportunists," wrote Mead on the eve of the twentieth century (1899a, pp. 405-406). "They are losing confidence in any delineation of the future conditions of society—any 'vision given on the mount' and are coming to clearer consciousness of the force that lies behind socialism. . . . Socialistic thinking may be different in France and England, but it is the same great force and cannot be studied in the camp of the programmist alone. It is coming to represent, not a theory, but a standpoint and attitude." In the early twentieth century Mead's views continued to evolve in the direction of progressivism and reform. He worked on behalf of the immigrants from Eastern Europe through the auspices of the Immigrants Protective League of Chicago, of which he was elected vice president. He took active part in the struggle for the progressive reforms (which he and John Dewey began in the early 1900s) in the City of Chicago school system. He was the treasurer of the University of Chicago settlement, and served on several strike settlement committees. Although Mead supported Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I, he showed a lot more compassion and understanding for conscientious objectors, most notably socialists, who were persecuted for their stance on the issue of war (Mead 1918). Around the time Mead wrote his articles for the *Herald* his political leanings were decidedly progressive, which was clearly evident in his election in 1918 as president of the City Club of Chicago, an organization of reform-minded businessmen and professionals. As did all progressives, Mead renounced class war as an instrument of social change, yet more than others he realized the importance of socialism's humanitarian objectives, which, he was convinced, could be more effectively accomplished by the moderate means advocated by the British Labor Party, rather than by the radical methods of the Russian Bolsheviks (1918a). In various writings of this period ("Democracy's Issues in the World War" is a good example), Mead affirmed his belief that social reconstruction should be an ongoing endeavor, that "there is always to be discovered a common social interest in which can be found the solution of social

strifes," and that the key role in directing social change should belong not to the politicians but to the general public (see Barry [1968], Diner [1975, 1980], Deegan and Burger [1978] Joas [1985], and Shalin [1987] for further discussion of Mead's involvement with progressive reform).

One final word about the following selections. The Mead-Castle correspondence is gathered in box 1, folders 1 to 3, of the George Herbert Mead Papers, a collection of letters and manuscripts by Mead at the Special Collections Department of the Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Editorial changes in the following letter are limited to obvious typographical errors and punctuation, which is added in the cases where its absence impedes reading. On a few occasions, I have inserted my own words in square brackets where I felt it might help the reader to follow Mead's argument. Mead's article on the issues of democracy in World War I has not been changed from its original form.

MEAD'S LETTER

Berlin 19/10 '90

My dear dear old boy,

Your letter has filled me with all sorts of feelings, but most of all with the assurance that we should get together and deliberately set about some social political work. We are neither of us so bound that we cannot feel free to set an ideal of this sort before us and fail in it if necessary. I don't mean an ideal but a line of activity. I am perfectly willing to fail. Life looks like such an insignificant affair that two or three or more years of utterly unsuccessful work would not seem to me in the slightest dampening, and the subjective satisfaction of actually doing what my nature asked for of infinitely more importance than anything else. And I am perfectly willing to pass off after two or three years if necessary or run on if [it is] best.

My mother is in such a position that as far as one can judge she will not need me, and with the money she has and the amount she will lay aside in this [present] work that is a perfect delight to her, she has assurance for an old age when she cannot or wishes not to work. Of course sudden sickness or other imaginable causes may come in, in which it would be necessary for me to look for some position where I could be assured of a long continued ability of supporting her. But that need not affect my plans now. I must put myself in a position to pay my debts, which need not last longer than two or three years, and can be in the very direction of any plans we may make.

You have your daughter to arrange for. But I don't imagine that this [necessity] of taking new work upon you would be a discouragement. In whatever position you occupy you can be reasonably sure of ordinary success, the success necessary to give a woman the fullest advantages which she can have.

The failure I think of is rather of accomplishing what we aim at than that of making out immediate pecuniary responsibilities. I am sure both of us and you especially have no reasonable cause to doubt this capability. I mean that I am willing to go into a reform movement which to my eyes may be a failure after all; simply for the sake of the work. I have used the personal pronoun so frequently because I can only speak for myself and still imagine that I speak your feeling also.

The direction in which we must work seems to me very clear. City politics. It was my fancy you know when we were in London. And it has steadily taken clearer shape and sunk steadily deeper in my thoughts and plans for the future [and] become steadily more fundamental in any thought of [our] taking hold in America. We have in America very little national feeling because of lack of neighbors. A national feeling that could guide and check politics. Our national politics are too far away from the average man for us to expect the reform to come from the top down. Abbot¹ told me—of course one cannot read too much in the opinion of one man—that we have never had a national legislature in which corrupt motives in the most pecuniary form could be more shamelessly used than in the present. He has had a good deal of experience in Washington. I take it that we can fairly say that the intelligent part of the American public has simply let out the government to the manufacturers and pensionable public and their agents and the politicians who make their money in it, to run as they wish, and [this public] is glad of the relief from attention to it on their part. And it will remain so unless some complication should come, in which the careful management of the central government became a matter of pecuniary or ideal importance to the intelligent public, and I see no such possibility now from the ordinary course of affairs. But if the reform starts in the city, one removes the machine to a large degree, educates the public politically, and starts at the point where the new social duties and functions which our government can take in should make their embrace. And upon pure city government no impure central government can rest.

We may as well meet this worst element at once. If we can purify there we can throughout, if we can't there we can't anywhere. If we can give American institutions the new blood of the social ideal it can come in only at this unit of our political life, and from this starting point it will naturally spread. We go on the principle now that the government should do as little as possible in order that as little as possible may be badly done, but it should do as much as possible in order that it may become vitally necessary that it may be well done. But I am convinced that it should start with the city where the problem is as simple as possible, where it can flow naturally from American institutions, and where everybody recognizes the necessity of change.

I think that we agree on this [so] that it is not necessary for me to go into my ideas on the subject, because they are yours also. And indeed the thing has become so axiomatic to me from thinking upon it that I have difficulty in seeing how it can appear anything but axiomatic to anyone. Our government in ideas and methods belongs so to the past, [including] our constitution with its checks and guards against the usurpation of a king [and] the utter lack of what is fresh or progressive in our lawmaking—that no one, at least who sees America from the point of comparison with Europe [and who] sees her where he can sum up her activities into an understandable picture, can doubt that new blood must be infused into the governmental structure, and that, unless we utterly forsake the evident line of progress of the rest of the world, this change must come in the government doing vastly more than it does now.

This [is] purely from the practical

(Incomplete)

Berlin Aug: 90

*** standpoint—from the ideal [standpoint] of course one finds here the opening toward all that is uplifting and satisfying in socialism—in the introduction of the social

idea into all forms of life. The work is intensely satisfactory, because touching men at the most vital points and yet being essentially ideal.

I should go a long way to meet you in your demand for the educating influence of the social idea—you remember our talk in London. But the immediate necessity is that we should have a clear conception of what forms socialism is taking in life of European lands, especially of the organisms of municipal life—how cities sweep their streets, manage their gas works and street cars, their *Turnfereins*, their houses of prostitution, their poor, their minor criminals, their police etc., etc., that one may come with ideas to the American work. Now Henry you must come and at least get such a share in these subjects and hold of the social political literature that you can go right on when we are back. I must teach at first, for I must earn money, but I shan't keep at it long. I want more active life and I feel that this phys[iological] psy[chology] gives me exactly the right sort of foundation for this work.

My vague plan now is that I go to the University of Minnesota as a teacher and you to Minneapolis as a lawyer and that we finally get control of the Minneapolis Tribune. This is of course hazy but Minneapolis has very large attractions for this work—it is young, not sunk into the meshes of any traditional machine, and yet beyond the boom period. But this is entirely superfluous castle building but go to some city we must and go to work and fail if need be, but work in any case and work satisfactorily. And now let us spend these last months together at work here. I am riper than ever before and you must be far riper than I.

My thinking runs along lines which make more and more a satisfactory outline for work as well as thought, and if I do not fail as I probably shall in expression I am not ashamed of the ideals I have to present nor of the form in which I see them. All this I have had before me for months but now that my heart aches for you I find that I turn to the same lines of thought and work as healing for you. Nothing can satisfy so well as that which carries one up into the calm regions of thought and ideal, and only that work can which has its roots in this soil. The type of such a man as Morley² is the most satisfying.

These long six months of silence my boy have been a most unfortunate break for us, and I feel occasionally that I may not be writing to you as I knew you, and so I feel the longing more and more that we spend at least these months together. I suppose that I can work alone if it be necessary but I can work with you so vastly better and our sympathy and love make the work so infinitely more satisfactory that I cannot deny myself the thought of our being together, at least now, while we both must stand still awhile and look toward the future, let us do it together. And you certainly can find no more healing place than here in Berlin. You have my boy such great powers—so large a heart—so true a taste and so great a horizon that we can't do without you. And you can't lead the life of the beasts that perish, you may perish but you can get no nearer this life, and there is too large an amount of other work to do to allow of your perishing.

The world is a lonely place, I know that we are walking along the bank of the largest and deepest stream of life and satisfactory life, that in nature and society God expresses himself if he could only be read, but it doesn't belong to our day to read him, and every time I attempt to make the spring into the current I feel as if I tried to step into the fourth dimension of space. We have to deny ourselves great emotions and great upliftings, but not the satisfactoriness of thinking and acting that is above the pettiness and

low desires and filth of narrow egotisms. I have a growing faith that we can live calmly and greatly—that [there] is a life that looks before and after—if not gloriously and deeply.

My dear dear Henry don't lose courage, don't lose confidence in yourself and remember that you have no right to regard judgments of yourself which are only mirrors of a worn-out nervous system. I have looked forward to this all this year and have thought how Frida³ would live with us in this life, have thought of her in Minneapolis, how her faith in you would hold you up, and the family of which she would be the center, would be the refuge to which you would come from vexations and debates. I have thought of the gatherings of the elect about this house, of the plans which would be made in this house, of the eager interest with which she [would] follow the fight and how she would charm and attract and disarm. And now how much of sweetness and courage and support of color and life fades out of the picture with the new made grave in Honolulu. But her daughter will grow up in an atmosphere that will be as invigorating as high ideals and high culture can make. That perfect organism which Frida represented is gone. How wonderfully beautiful her love and nature were. I have loved over again those stormy days in Leipzig, and the beauty of her nature has come to me with an overwhelming force, and not only this but the blessing to the family there. There is a content in their life—there is a future for Lieschen and Hanni⁴ that could never have been otherwise. Frida has had a year of life which has been far far richer than any life which she could have had in Germany and the loss of Leipzig has only had an uplifting effect. That her life would have been far richer for them who can doubt, but even in her death she has only been a blessing.

But though this color has gone from the picture its great lines remain, there is still the light, there are still the ideas, there are still the vast curves of progress that are so much greater than our little lives that they lift us out of them.

I don't know where this letter will find you, perhaps in Honolulu, perhaps in California. Perhaps you will be with us in Berlin before it reaches you. I wish with my whole soul that this might be the case. I know that you must get away from Honolulu. Helen has let me see most of the letters from the family and I know now as I never knew before in what a home of love and tenderness you have lived. I have constructed your life there as I never had before, and however hard it was to think of you in this suffering I could always be thankful for the love which has sheltered you on every side. But it is in activity that you will get the real health again. It is the thinking and feeling of the things which lie away above and beyond and before us.

Come Henry and let us get the return that we can from a friendship that has ripened through so much of change and distress and overharrowing and finds us now in the full possession of ourselves and the riches that thought and experience and the sight of the beauties of nature and art can give us and let us make the bond stronger that holds [us] together. That we may hold each others hands up in the years to come, and I know that even in Honolulu there is no deeper and richer and nobler love for you than Helen will meet you with, but you know that better than I. She is certainly better than she was when I wrote three weeks ago, though it has been a tremendous strain upon her. If this finds you in Honolulu you must remember me with real affection to the family. You will know how my heart has been drawn out to them these days.

Yours as ever,

MEAD'S ARTICLE

Democracy's Issues in the World War

by Prof. George H. Mead
University of Chicago

Looking back over the three years of the war, realizing that we ourselves are entering into the valley of its shadow of death, accepting the spiritual bankruptcy of war which has been the logical outcome of its efficiency, seeing all its pomp and trappings hopelessly mired in the trenches and the deliberate modern barbarities that demand retaliatory barbarities, we recognize that war can no more be accepted as part of the mechanism of modern society than filth, diseases and blights and famines which have stalked as "God's agents" through human history.

But the last three years have accomplished this, they have transformed what began as a vast imperial and commercial raid on the world by Germany and Austria into a contest between democracy and autocracy, and the entrance of Russian and American democracy into the fight have underscored the transformation. It remains to be seen how far the democratic forces of the western world can realize this change and with what intelligence they can direct its fortunes.

In Russia we can see as yet only huge popular upheavals and depressions, with heroic figures struggling to master its disorganization and give effective direction to its titanic forces. In the western countries of Europe the socialistic parties that have so largely directed the action of the masses have begun to assert themselves again, seeking, on the one hand, for greater democratic control at home and, on the other, with more uncertainty to revive their internationalism.

We can only wait, with patience and profound sympathy, the outcome of the Russian revolution. It is not as yet articulate. The socialistic international we can better understand and more clearly envisage. We must not conceive it in terms of American socialism, for socialism has never been the articulate voice of democracy or even of labor in America.

Socialism abroad has been the outcome of popular struggle against governments which have been in the hands of privileged classes. It has logically pitted against the privileged classes the laboring masses. It has undertaken to give them a class consciousness and a class program with which to fight the dominant classes. It has been democracy's fighting formation when opposed to a modern feudalism. But it has been a fighting formation, and has opposed the program of a socialistic state to the feudal order it conceived itself to be fighting. Not unnaturally it sought to endow the classes in control of its own state program with the same powers it would wrest from the privileged classes.

Just because it has been a battle formation of the laboring classes it has never represented the democratic attitude of a whole community and its internationalism has stood only for the solidarity of the laborers in the different countries in their opposition to the privileged groups. It has never stood for the common spirit of a society made up of different nations. It has been unable to enter into vital relation with the national self-consciousness which is of such overwhelming importance in the present struggle.

In a word, socialism, in its international attitude, is unable to express the individual spirit of one community entering into relations with another in a society of peoples.

When the declarations of war came socialism's internationalism was shown to have no roots in the larger society of the world. And even now, when the socialistic groups come forward with formulae for peace which are free from the tenets of their doctrines, they are suspect at home to the governments they oppose on principle and abroad because they have supported their own governments in their war aims.

The real assumption of democracy inside the society of a nation and within the society of different nations is that there is always to be discovered a common social interest in which can be found the solution of social strifes. Democratic institutions recognize this assumption in giving political power to all groups and individuals, confident that out of the political struggle of the conflicting aims and interests of individuals and groups the common interest must eventually arise to command the allegiance of all.

Democratic advance, therefore, has always been in the direction of breaking down the social barriers and vested privileges which have kept men from finding the common denominators of conflicting interests which have been at war with each other, because they have been incommensurable.

The same democratic assumption in the relation of nations insists that there are no irreconcilable conflicts between peoples if only there is adequate opportunity for bringing these conflicting interests into deliberative contact with each other, backed by a public opinion that enforces a thrashing out of the questions, before resort is had to force.

It is the laboring masses of all communities that are more interested in the assertion of this democratic assumption than the vested interests. In war they suffer most and profit least. They have more at stake, for they are the beneficiaries of every democratic advance, and no advance can be of such importance as that which dispossesses autocracy of the last hold of militarism.

Thus there has arisen a great opportunity for democracy in America, and especially for labor, which must be most jealous of its security, an opportunity to give to the war, so far as we are concerned in it, the paramount issue of the elimination of war by the democratic principle. This implies the rights of nationalities, government by the consent of the governed, the opportunity for the full discussion of international disputes under conditions which open the discussion to the public opinion of the world before war may be declared, and such a league of nations as will enforce this appeal to the democratic principle.

With Russia still inarticulate, with the European nations compromised by their earlier formulations of terms of peace and the uncertain note of the socialistic parties, America is in a peculiar degree called upon to interpret the import of the struggle between democracy and autocracy.

The principles have been presented by President Wilson. It remains for the American people and their most democratic groups to make these principles consciously their own as the issues of the war.

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NOTES

1. The reference is unclear. It is possible that Mead misspelled the name and that he meant to say "Abbott," in which case he most likely referred to a librarian whom he befriended while working as a tutor in Minneapolis and whose name crops up in his letters of the period.
2. John Morley (1838-1923), a British statesman and man of letters, known for his advocacy of land reform, progressive taxation, school reform, as well as for his highly acclaimed biographies of Gladstone and Cromwell.
3. Frida Stechner, Henry Castle's wife, killed in the summer of 1890 in a tragic accident by a runaway horse.
4. The reference is to Frida's siblings and her family in Leipzig.

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