

Felicity Carver

No New Heroes

TELLIN. CARPET SHELL. COMMON WENTLETRAP (*CLATHRUS CLATHRUS*). The self-conscious Latin, suggesting dreams of scholarship in unsteady capitals, made Kevin smile. There were careful divisions in the box that held the shells, made with pieces of card painstakingly sellotaped to the sides. He picked out a limpet, roughened and grained like old bark on the outside, the interior silk-smooth and feminine. He thought of the day when they had gone to the seaside, when he had suffered the empty yawning feeling of car sickness while crouched in the back seat, when the roar of surf and shingle on an Atlantic beach had almost deafened them, and his mother had complained fretfully of the cold. He found it difficult to visualise her now.

They had not realised then that the cold she complained of on the beach would not be cured by the heater in the car or the loan of an extra jacket. He could not recognise her in his own or his brother Michael's face. The only picture was a watercolour, framed, and hanging in the room downstairs.

It seemed wrong not to be able to remember in a place that had survived on memories. His father had lived on them finally, other people's rather than his own, immersing himself in Irish history like a convert to a new religion, talking endlessly of Connolly and Pearse, to anyone he could trap into listening. There were still exercise books in the drawers of his desk, full of poetry his father had tried to write, ballads on Kilmainham gaol and the Easter Rising. As the scholar in the family, Kevin had been asked to approve and had been embarrassed because they had seemed naive. He was ashamed of his father for having written such bad imitative verse. It had often seemed as though the people in the poems were more real to the old man than himself and his brother Michael. As the eldest, Michael had taken over the running of the farm long before their father had died, though they pretended he was still in charge and reported back to him about the harvest and new calves, and consulted him on what to plant in the long field. The old man had not tried to pressure them into his beliefs; he had not thought it possible for the two of them to feel as strongly as he had. There could be no new heroes, only the old ones.

Apprehension stiffened Kevin's fingers. He dropped the shell and grovelled on the floor, inhaling carpet dust as he searched under the bed. Bella and the

Hoover never penetrated this far. There were old papers, festering socks and other clothing he didn't recognise, black seed-like mouse droppings and a couple of paperbacks. The mice had eaten part of the mattress, also some of the paperbacks; there were small chunks of foam spat out in heaps of beige confetti.

Why had he ever asked Alison to stay here? It wouldn't work, it couldn't. It had seemed so possible in his room at university where he spent some of his days and occasional nights with her. There, his home was what he described to other people, something mildly quaint and Irish; dangerous too, he'd made much of living on the border. Now he was faced with discovery. He should have known she would accept; she was interested in politics, going to meetings, sometimes chairing them, coming out enthusiastic, full of what had been said about the troubles, the solutions. She had adopted Ireland a while ago, needing a cause to fight for, having none of her own. He thought it was probably why she had taken up with him in the first place, though he didn't share her convictions. When Kevin went to a meeting he felt like a man outside a television shop watching the screens without the volume—only there it was the volume without the action, hollow palms clapping, the beer-breath of students, cigarette smoke shrouding their faces like the aftermath of a bomb.

"You're so negative." It was one of her words that term. She picked up phrases and discarded them later like old clothes. Involvement's something else where I come from, he thought. Where the past is a soft peatbog trembling under your feet. They were all caught up in it, his brother, his father.

Waiting for Alison to come, he took up his part-time job at the hotel where they greeted him with friendly suspicion.

"You won't want to be talking to us any more, not with all that education."

"All those exams and still working in a dump like this."

"You're the bright one, maybe you can tell us how the wiring works. The fuse is gone again."

And when he couldn't tell them, they were happy because it proved that practice was better than theory, wasn't it. Or there was Joe who had been at school with him, earning money as the barman, dextrous with glasses and different drinks and girls. Smooth-

talking Joe would never need books to get where he was going.

"What's the point in going that far away? You can do well enough here, can't you?"

"There's Dublin for you, surely to God it's not that bad."

Watching their small interests, the farms, the businesses, what won at the Curragh, the border patrols. Everyone in and out of each other's thoughts. And Michael, his brother, apparently content with the land.

"You must be having a great time of it over there. All those demonstrations, and the parties."

"Oh yes." He had given up saying he worked a long time ago, they didn't want to hear it, he had to live out their fantasies. They knew, they read the papers, watched the telly. What could he tell them?

"Don't put those crates there, not now, we want them over this way where Joe can get at them easy." Jackson fussed, cleaning his hands on the towel tied round his waist. "What's your brother doing now, I hear he was in the north last week. Is the meat in the cold-store yet, the day's too hot for it to stay out long. Quite a man now, Michael, isn't he?"

There were long afternoons on the farm turning the straw in the warm wind, driving alongside the combine while it spewed out a stream of corn into the trailer. When he stepped out of his clothes at night, grain fell from his pockets, chaff and husks from the folds, gritting underfoot like shingle. Dust shook from his hair, the pillow grew blond with it.

THE ARAN SWEATER bought in a tourist shop was too thick for the September afternoon. There were small beads of moisture on her nose, and the high-heeled boots wobbled on the rough tarmac by the bus-stop.

"I didn't think you were coming."

"I sent you a postcard."

The day brightened for him, he seized her bag and threw it into the van with a feeling of ownership. He found himself talking all the way to the farm, pointing out landmarks like the tinkers' caravans parked on the old roadway, wondering at his own volubility. He took her into the house through the kitchen, noticing Bella hadn't cleaned it, realising too late it was her day off. The place was crowded with clothes hanging like flayed skins from a pulley near the ceiling, while a frying-pan full of solidified fat rested on the stove with a weird hallowe'en-mask design etched on its surface. He made coffee and they sat drinking it. Her eyes were half-covered by the dark curling hair. She's here, really here, he thought, absently picking pieces of dog-meal out of the fruit bowl.

When Michael came back in the evening, Kevin was nervous, hoping for his approval, angry with himself for needing it.

"I've heard a lot about you", she said. Michael was

wary of offending because Kevin was there watching.

"No good, I'll bet."

"Not much." Alison laughed, and Kevin was sure he could hear what Michael was thinking. Why couldn't you find someone of your own kind? She's English, isn't she. He could feel the unspoken phrases in the way Michael put down his glass.

Next day he phoned the hotel to say he couldn't come, there was too much to do on the farm, listening happily to the annoyance at the other end. Then he found Alison an old pair of wellingtons, and they went out walking over the small fields, past the broken-toothed walls, the hills fringed with rough woodland. There had been talk of selling the farm once, when a developer was looking for land nearby, but the thought had seemed like a betrayal and they had left it, the new houses being built a couple of miles away by the village.

A helicopter surfaced briefly above the trees like a submarine coming up for air, hovering beside a church, then plunging down with the speed of a pheasant avoiding the guns. There were small figures moving over a field a long way off.

"Soldiers." He pointed. She followed the line of his hand. "That's the north over there." What your political friends talk about, he thought.

"Is your brother with the IRA?"

"Why should he be?" He was aware the question wasn't an answer.

"I saw the books on the shelf in the kitchen. The ones about the Rising, Irish history."

"They were my father's books. You should have met him, he was the keen one."

Somewhere in the distance there was the spitting sound of a ricochet. "Probably a rabbit", he said. "They get bored."

She wasn't afraid, though.

There had been that other day, hot and thundery, the scent of cut grass heavy on the air. A large white house with wide windows that stared defiantly out over the countryside near Drymen, with Alison's parents, middle-aged, middle-class, sitting at a wide table trying to discover a mutual friend who could provide a reference for this strange young man their daughter had brought home. Afterwards Alison and he had walked by the burn at the end of the wood, past a paddock where ponies stood in the trees' shade. A black and white spaniel frolicked in front of them, then began digging at the bank in frantic haste. It yelped suddenly and rolled on the earth, biting furiously at its sides. Alison had run forward, had brushed the angry wasps away and pushed the dog into the water, submerging it in the pool, scraping the insects from her own clothes, while the dog pawed at its face and whimpered, eyes swelling. Kevin had been unable to move; when he had read *1984* he had known it would be wasps or bees waiting for him in the cage, not rats, that he would yell, "Do it to her". Then Alison had shouted at him to help, and he had heard the scorn in her voice and had come up too late

to be of use. Later he had bathed the lumps on the back of her neck with vinegar, her mother's remedy, and kissed the small swellings that whitened under the pressure of his fingers, inhaling the sour smell of her disfavour.

At lunchtime in the kitchen Bella came in and slapped the plates of food down, great humpbacked potatoes swimming in a sea of gravy, and left a bowl of fruit reduced to some unrecognisable pulp on the side.

"She doesn't approve of you", said Kevin.

Alison was dissecting the meat, trimming the fat off it. He caught Michael's eye and looked away. Then he cut the fat off his own so that she wouldn't be the only one, and scraped the plates into the dog's bowl when they'd finished.

"I'll be away now", said Bella. "Maybe you'll manage the supper. Perhaps she could heat it up." The third person reduced Alison to an indeterminate status like someone who is mentally handicapped.

"I'm sure I can, it's kind of you to leave something." Bella wasn't to be won over. She put her hands by her sides like a drill sergeant and turned away.

"What did I do?"

"You're here with the two of us. Competition. That's enough for her."

It was the horse that helped Alison and Michael to understand each other. He had found her looking over the loose-box door and asked if she could ride.

"Of course." Kevin remembered the ponies in the field at Drymen, fat and idle in the sunshine.

The long-legged four-year-old was awkward as a teenager, lumbering out of the stall, scraping the flaps of the saddle on the door, staring intently into the distance while Michael gave Alison a leg-up. Then they were out in the soft earth of the field, hooves cutting great scars in the grass as the horse plunged, humped his back, and exploded into bucks, great wild leaps that took him off down the slope with the girl balanced on his back, her long legs reaching down and holding his sides, laughing as she turned him at the far end and made him circle, wheeling and twisting until his back flattened out again and he dropped his head and with heaving flanks floated over the grass to the gate, looking like the horse he would be one day. There was a red mark on Alison's cheek where a branch had caught her, an exhilaration in her face which Kevin hadn't seen before, and her eyes were full of the space of the sky and the swooping horse.

Michael was smiling with her. "I thought he'd have you off."

"No bother, he's great."

Kevin grudged their excitement, he didn't share their admiration for the sweating animal, the hair ruffled with sweat on the shoulders, the hooves shifting restlessly. He had endured ponies for a while because there had been no option, but later his ability for school work had let him become a different person

and given him an alibi. Alison's hands were darkened with the grease from the horse's mane, he could smell it on them still when they were in the house afterwards. When she rubbed her fingers together it flaked off in small curls like shavings from a rubber.

"Don't you ever ride?"

"Not now. And never that one, he terrifies me, he's only half-broken. Weren't you frightened?"

"I like being scared." He looked at her and didn't understand, and was afraid suddenly at the gap between them.

THAT EVENING he went out with Michael to the barn to help with hay for the cattle who stamped and moved in the straw, a few beasts being kept in till they calved. Their breath was warm in the half-darkness; he could smell muck, clean fresh hay, and the sweet reek of last year's silage.

"I'll be away tonight." Michael was leaning over the old gate they used as a partition. Kevin felt his stomach tighten as he stood on the concrete passageway, hearing the rustle of rats in the straw.

"All right", he said.

"Enjoy yourself then." He swore softly, aware of Michael grinning, feeling himself dismissed like a child.

When he lifted the latch on her door later and slipped in, she was still awake.

"Where was the car going?"

"It was only Michael."

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know myself, he keeps it that way."

The sheets were cold at the side of the bed. He shivered beside her, nervous at being with her here in the house.

He knew Michael was back when he went to shave in the morning. There was already a rim of dark hairs and soap round the basin, blood-flecked foam from tooth-cleaning. Michael always had trouble with his teeth. Kevin scrubbed at the basin, suddenly fastidious.

Michael was frying eggs in the old grease of the pan. When Alison came down there were all kinds of questions in her face, and something of the reverence of a small boy meeting his football hero. Kevin tasted hot fat, blistering his tongue, watching her eyes on Michael's unresponsive back.

"What was it?" she asked him later, washing the plates under the tap.

"Don't know. Smuggling maybe."

"Is that all?"

"There's money in it."

"It's not just for money, though, is it."

He wanted to say, don't glorify it, don't make him into something he isn't. He's my brother, he's a chancer, he takes risks, they all do. And if you quote all that Marxist-Leninist stuff at him he wouldn't know what you meant, the theory doesn't bother him,

that isn't why he's in it. He was born into it. The day he accepted the farm he inherited the old man's dreams. He didn't have to find his war, it was on his doorstep, and I didn't realise what it meant to him then, not till a couple of years ago.

In his own room later he turned on the radio and listened to the news, but there was nothing about the north, only the visit of some Minister from London.

Alison rode the horse again the following day, cantering easily round the field while they watched from the gate, and when she came back he saw her face was alive as it had been the previous time. Flecks of foam danced off the bit, caught on their shirts, spattered on the ground as the horse sidled through the gateway.

"He's got quality", said Michael. "So have you." She smiled and Kevin turned away as she slipped down off the horse.

He took her out for a drive later. He would show her it all, why not. She wanted to see for herself, that's what she'd said. They crossed the border with only a perfunctory search of the car, and he drove to one of the nearby towns, where they bumped over the ramps in the road outside the police station, the barbed wire high on the walls. Armoured vehicles moved swiftly through the streets, heading for sanctuary. They left the car and walked into the centre, and the shops were like any high street, full of people and children.

"I could be at home", she said, disappointed.

I am, he thought.

HE DID NOT like to ask how long she was staying, he didn't want to put dates to it, limit his fantasies. Instead she wanted to try and help with the farm; he drove the baler and took her on the tractor with him, standing behind her while she tried to steer it, his arms round her waist. They cleaned up the fields for Michael following with the plough, seagulls wailing round his head like new-born babies, the machine stuck to the grooves like an old record. She made some kind of cake that he hadn't eaten before, with cinnamon and ginger stolen from Bella's cupboard on her day off. Another time they burned the old stubble in the field down by the wood, and had a job to put it out at the far end, beating furiously with bundles of branches ripped from the trees after the wind changed, winning finally when a gust diverted the flames, giving them time to stamp it out. They collapsed exhausted, smelling the smoke on their clothes and hair, laughing, their energy spent, the prickling stubble scarring the backs of their necks. He had rubbed his eyes with his hands, and dark specks had floated over the sun when he opened them.

Other days she went riding, with Michael walking beside her. And then Kevin became aware when he woke in the morning that she was down in the kitchen

early, when Michael got up, making the tea, grilling bacon because she wouldn't let them eat all that fat. Helping out, she said later when Kevin asked. I want to be useful, not just a guest. But he knew she listened like a dog for the steps on the stair and began to watch her, wondering why he had asked her to come. When he went to her room one night she was cool, pleading stiffness after the riding, and his hurried assertive movements were clumsy because he was afraid, giving her the excuse to avoid sleeping with him. He had gone back to his own room holding the hurt like a drawing clasped to his chest so that no one could see it. He knew that Michael had no interest, she was Kevin's friend from college, that was all, and could not bring himself to end it.

When the message came he was outside, carrying a bucket full of water that slopped into his boots when he opened the door of the stable and the horse pushed its nose at him. He shoved at the animal. Get over you bastard, he said with affection, and the horse blew at the water, snorting, turning its reflection into a monster.

He didn't hear Alison until she spoke. "That was the phone. A friend of your brother's." Something in her voice made him look round.

"Something up?"

"They didn't have time to say much, it was a call-box. And the accent, I didn't get all of it. A place, a crossroads, they want you to pick him up."

Damn him. Oh, damn him. He didn't want to get in the van, to go out and drive into whatever it was that Michael was involved with.

"You'll have to go."

He was driving one fist gently into the other in his desperation. "I suppose so."

"For God's sake, he's your brother. I'd go but I don't know where it is."

"What makes you so righteous?" They glared at each other over the roof of the van. "It's not a game." If it wasn't for her pushing him he'd be away already. It wasn't her business, was it.

"I didn't think it was. Are you going then?"

He was back in the kitchen at Drymen, inhaling vinegar, hearing the scorn in her voice.

"Of course."

"I'll come with you." She was in the front seat before he could stop her. "It'll look less suspicious anyway."

They crossed the border on the same road, but this time the guards went through the car and made them get out.

"Panic on?" He wanted to provoke them, his powerlessness annoyed him; if he was being dragged into their war he would fight it.

They didn't answer, just waved him through.

With the aid of an old frayed map they waited at the side of a narrow road, a high bank protecting them, watching the crossroads a couple of hundred yards beyond. Rain streamed down the windscreen, and water had leaked through the rubber seal on the

door, flooding the pocket and creating a sodden mass of old rags and petrol-station coupons for glasses.

"I never imagined being involved, not like this."

He slid his arm across the back of her seat and put it round her shoulders, settling himself, but she began to talk.

"You and your brother, you're not really that alike, are you?"

Do we have to be, he thought. "How?"

"I'm not sure. He's different from most of the people I've met, like someone who's been abroad for a long time, who's travelled to places I'll never go."

"He hasn't been away much, mostly just the north. And once to London."

"I didn't mean that."

He didn't want her to work towards it, he tried to change the subject, but she wasn't to be put off.

"It's as if he's done something that changed him. Like a long illness, or being in a war. Another country where the rules, the way things are done, are different, ours don't apply. Except the other day, he was like anyone when we were down in the field trying to put out the fire. But sometimes I feel he's not there at all, he's living somewhere else."

"A different reality." He wished he hadn't found the words.

"You do understand then."

"Oh, I understand. But I don't want to go there."

"I would."

"You like being scared."

"Is that wrong? It's so safe where I live."

His fear was something that seemed to move in the rain by the crossroads, or walking into a Belfast pub with Michael and realising they were in the wrong territory, seeing the glasses stop half-way to gaping mouths. The windows blowing out before you heard the noise, seeing the car jump in the air, feeling the blast on your face. It was a drug, he had seen Michael high on it, and Alison too the day she rode the horse. But you didn't have to go looking for it, did you? He had it now, a sick taste in his mouth as he peered through the windscreen at the road, sensing movement. He wound down the window.

Why do you have to talk about him all the time, he thought. His feet were growing cold; he pushed them against the pedals, listening to the rain. He should have brought some whisky. It would have helped with the waiting, the darkness.

THE NOISE WAS like hailstones pattering on the tarmac, it took him a moment to realise what was happening.

"Jesus, let's get out of here." He let off the brake and rolled the van down the hill without lights, turning on the ignition, letting it jerk into life, rubbing the misted interior, huddling against the wheel.

"You can't go, not yet."

"We can't stay, that's for sure." Something hit,

scraped along the flank of the van. "They're shooting out there for God's sake!"

"But Michael."

"He's late, he won't come."

"He asked you to wait!" She was clutching his arm.

"He's got more lives than a damn cat, that one. Can you see him?"

She peered through the back windows, then opened the door and leaned out.

"Be careful, you don't know who it was back there. See anyone?"

"No."

"Well then." He changed gear.

"We should have waited."

"What for, he may be back by now anyway." She grabbed at the steering-wheel but he pushed her away.

"He asked us."

"If we crash it'll be no good to anyone. Forget your bloody boy-scout loyalty."

"Suppose he's hurt."

"Did they say so?"

They crossed into the south on a small lane little better than a cart track, driving through a farmyard to reach the road the far side, and got back to an empty house and the dogs leaping at them in welcome. He tried to kiss Alison in the passage outside her room, but she made it clear she didn't want him to. "Wait a minute, look", he said, but she shut the door.

Michael came back at midday; the dogs heard him first and slipped out of the barn, then Kevin went, afraid of what he might see, but Michael was only tired. "Thanks anyway", he said, and they laughed with relief and opened cans of beer in the kitchen in celebration, while Alison who had expected anger and recriminations looked on with incomprehension.

"She doesn't understand anything", said Bella cheerfully, slicing apples into a bowl. "She's packed. I didn't think she'd stay."

When she came downstairs Kevin took the bag from her. "I'll drive you to the bus station." She didn't acknowledge his offer, but she climbed into the van.

On the way he said, "We did the right thing, he wasn't coming anyway."

She was staring out of the window, watching cloud shadows race over the fields.

"Did you know that in 1916 when they had printed copies of the Proclamation they couldn't put them up because they forgot the glue?"

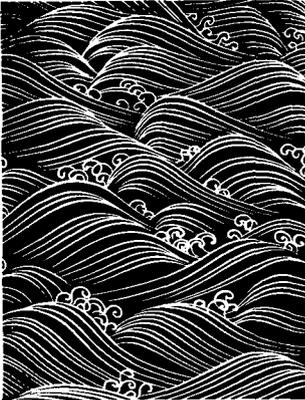
"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It seemed significant."

"You were going to leave him, weren't you?"

"No", he said. He heard the lie in the small space of the car, against the rattle of the broken exhaust. I left him because you liked him, not because I was afraid. Do it to him, that was what he had thought. Bella's right, she doesn't understand anything. And he was happy because she was going and there would not be another betrayal.

Danube



THE RIVER has many names. Among some peoples the words Danube and Ister were used respectively for the upper and lower courses, but sometimes for the entire length. Pliny, Strabo and Ptolemy wondered where the one ended and the other began; maybe in Illyria, or at the Iron Gates. The river, which Ovid called *bis-nominis* or double-named, draws German culture, with

its dream of an Odyssey of the spirit, towards the east, mingling it with other cultures in countless hybrid metamorphoses in which it finds its fulfilment and its fall. The German scholar who travels fitfully along the whole course of the river carries with him his baggage of fads and quotations; if the poet entrusts himself to his *bateau ivre*, his understudy tries to follow the advice of Jean Paul, who suggested that on the way one should gather and record not only visual images but old prefaces and playbills, railway-station gossip, epics and battles, funerary and metaphysical inscriptions, newspaper clippings, and notices pinned up in taverns and parish halls. *Memories, impressions, reflections and landscapes on a voyage to the Orient*, announces a title of Lamartine's. Reflections and impressions of whom? one may ask. When we travel alone, as happens only too often, we have to pay our way out of our own pocket; but occasionally life is good to us, and enables us to see the world, if only in brief snatches of time, with those four or five friends who will bear us witness on the Day of Judgment, and speak in our name.

Between one trip and the next we attempt to transfer the bulging files of notes on to the flat surface of paper, to get the bundles of stuff, the note-pads, the leaflets and the catalogues, down on to typewritten sheets. Literature as

CLAUDIO MAGRIS was born in Trieste in 1939. He graduated from the University of Turin, and from 1970-78 lectured there on German language and literature; he is now on the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy at the University of Trieste. The translator of Ibsen, Kleist, and Schnitzler, he has also written many works of literary criticism. His book "Danube", from which these pieces are selected, is published (in a translation by Patrick Creagh) on 3 July by Collins Harvill.

moving house: and as in every change of address something is lost and something else turns up in a "safe place" we had forgotten about. Indeed, we go almost like orphans, says Hölderlin in his poem on the sources of the Danube: the river flows on glittering in the sunlight like the current of life itself, but the feeling that it reflects back is an illusion afflicting the dazzled sight, like the non-existent luminous spots on the wall, the neon dazzle.

A tremor of nothingness sets fire to things, the tin cans left on the beach and the reflectors of motor cars, just as sunset makes the windows blaze. The river adds up to nothing and travelling is immoral: this is what Weininger said, as he was travelling. But the river is an old Taoist master, and along its banks it gives lessons on the great Wheel and the gaps between its spokes. In every journey there is at least a smattering of the South, with hours of relaxation, of idleness. Heedless of the orphans on its banks the Danube flows down towards the sea, towards the supreme conviction. . . .

A bold hypothesis was recently set forth by Amedeo, highly esteemed sedimentologist and secret historian of red herrings. He proposes that the Danube is born from a tap. Without wishing to summarise the age-old library of publications on the subject—they stretch from Hecataeus, predecessor of Herodotus, to the issues of *Merian* magazine, on news-stands now—we should at least mention the aeons for which the source of the Danube was as unknown as that of the Nile, in whose waters it is in any case reflected and mingled, if not *in re* at least *in verbis*, in the comparisons and parallels between the two rivers which for centuries tread on each other's heels in learned commentaries.

The river's sources were the object of the investigations, conjectures or information of Herodotus, Strabo, Caesar, Pliny, Ptolemy, the Pseudo-Scymnus, Seneca, Mela and Eratosthenes. Its sources were imagined or located in the Hercynian Forest, in the land of the Hyperboreans, among the Celts or the Scythians, on Mount Abnoba or in the land of Hesperia, while other hypotheses mention a fork in the river, with one branch flowing into the Adriatic, along with divergent descriptions of the Black Sea estuaries. Whether it be from history or from myth—which has the Argonauts sailing down the Danube as far as the Adriatic—that we pass to prehistoric eras, our reconnaissance is left groping in the dark and lost in vastness, in geography on a titanic scale: the *Urdonau* in the Bernese Oberland, with its springs, where the peaks of the Jungfrau and the Eiger now rise, the primordial Danube into which flowed the *Ur-Rhine*, the *Ur-Neckar* and the *Ur-Main*, and which towards