

Part II. The Life of Charles Fenner

Chapter 12. The Fenner Lineage

Introduction

During my childhood in Adelaide in the 1930s, Fenner was not a common name. In 1937, for example, the name occurred only twice in the Adelaide telephone book: C. A. E. Fenner (my father, whose forebears came from Germany, at 42 Alexandra Avenue), and A. G. Fenner, the head wool appraiser for Elder Smith and Co. Ltd. The latter family had migrated from England, and of course Fenner's cricket ground in Cambridge is familiar to many. Although I have little time for genealogical studies, since they ignore the female genes, my father had acquired a lot of information about the genealogy of the relevant Fenners, including from a substantial book (*Hessisches Geschlechterbuch*, 1971) so I begin an account of his life with a brief summary of that history.

My grandfather, Johannes Fenner, was born in the village of Niedergrenzebach, in the province of Hesse, in Germany, on 10 February, 1841, the fourth of seven children. In 1860, troubled by the prospect of being conscripted for military service after Hesse had come under Prussian control, and attracted by the idea of gold mining, he went to England and in Liverpool he embarked on the ship *King of Algiers*, bound for Victoria. He left the ship in Melbourne and went to Talbot, near Ballarat. He was naturalized there in 1874, and on 19 January, 1875, he married Mary Thomas, whose parents had come from Staffordshire, in England, and who had been born in Thebarton, a suburb of Adelaide, on 16 February, 1852. They had eight children, four boys and four girls, one of whom died as a baby and another at the age of four years. Charles Albert Edward, the fifth child, was born in 1884. The youngest member of the family, Thomas Richard, enlisted in the Australian army in 1915 and was killed by 'friendly fire' at Mouquet Farm in France on 29 August, 1916. Johannes Fenner died on 13 July 1923; his wife, Mary, died in Ballarat in 1939.

Some of the German Fenners have been very interested in their family history. During trips to Germany in 1931 and 1937, my father and mother went to the village of Niedergrenzebach, where my grandfather was born. Below I quote edited portions of Father's diaries that relate to these visits (C. Fenner, 1931, 1937).

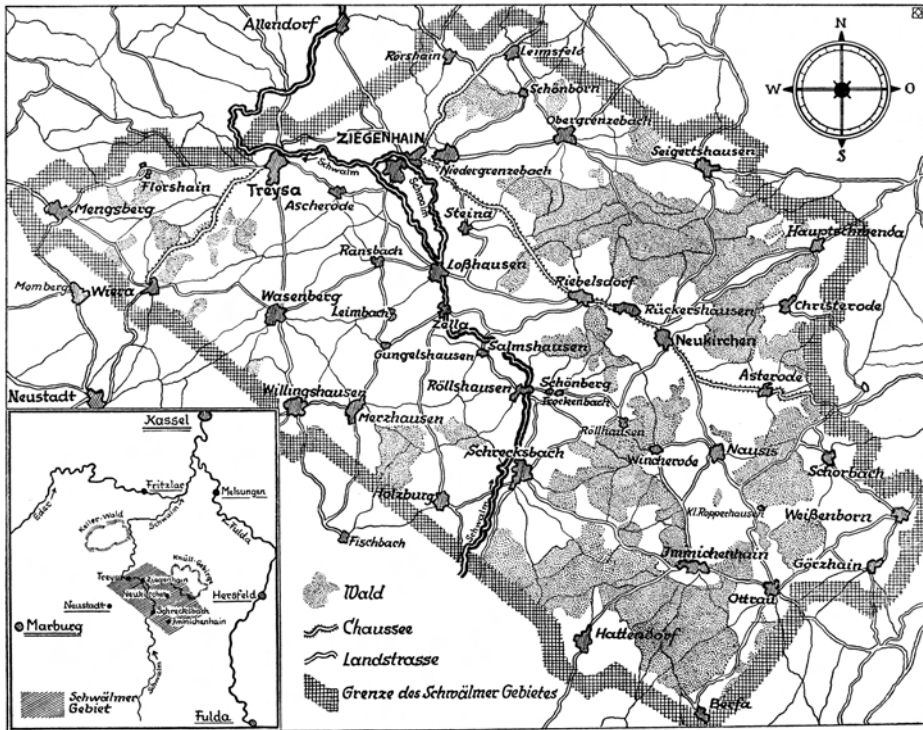


Abb. 1. Karte des Schwälmer Gebietes. Links unten Übersichtskarte

Figure 12.1. Map of Hesse and the Schwalm valley

Extracts from Charles Fenner's 1931 and 1937 Diaries

27 October 1931, Niedergrenzebach

After breakfast in Treysa [the nearest railway station], we left with Max Pirsch, the driver, to go to Niedergrenzebach, in search of my father's people and his birthplace. There were the hills and fields and woods where my father played, and where he went to school, and where he put the teacher's son's face in the mud of the Grenzebach. There were no fences between properties, just as he had said, and which looked so strange to us. There were fruit trees along the roads, and there were strange old many-storeyed houses, with stock (cows, horses, pigs) below and people above.

The day was superb. These Fenners turn out to be a peculiar people, very strong on tradition, fond of the past, and living in houses that the Fenners have occupied for centuries. Again, they are, as Dad used to tell me, Schwälmer people—a race apart, with their own religions and manners, and all distinctly set out in their different dress. The dress of

the Schwälmer I knew from my grandfather's and uncle's and aunt's photographs (Figure 12.2). I did not know that they were still used, the men's curious embroidered cloaks, the brass-buckled shoes, the pill-box hat, which covers a knot of hair, as it has done for centuries, and as it does today, to her great pride, for my own rosy-cheeked second cousin, Anna Catharina Fenner!



Bräutpaar und Brautjungfern

Der Bräutigam trägt auf dem Dreimaster „Die Luft“, den hohen Strauß aus Glasfugeln, der mit Rosmarin-
zweigen umsteckt ist. Diese werden nach der Hochzeit eingepflanzt.

Figure 12.2. Schwälmer men's and women's attire

Yesterday at Marburg, we saw several people get on the train in the same curious, ancient, and (to me) quite beautiful costume. I said to Peggy,

little believing that it was true: 'There may be a Fenner among those.' Sure enough, there was my own blood cousin, Anna Catharina Fenner.

Well, we got to Niedergrenzebach. It was a thrill. Such a quaint and ancient place. I can't describe it, with its packed series of high, curiously gabled buildings, hundreds of years old, and its crooked streets, and so on. There is nothing like it anywhere else, except perhaps the neighbouring village of Obergrenzebach. We went to the village schoolmaster; he could not speak English. We went to the farrier's. He again was most kind, but he had forgotten his English. Then we went to the home of the farmer, Johannes Adam Fenner. We met the man himself, in this four-square farmyard, all smiles and cheerfulness and goodwill. Yes, he was Johannes Fenner. Yes, he had married my father's cousin and inherited the family property! And he took us and showed us the carved stones, of the farm, going back, I think, for hundreds of years, where Johannes Fenners had owned and built, with *Gottes'* help, this farm. There were four such inscriptions, all of different dates, one carved in stone, one carved in the wood over the door and two painted in German on the great beams of the buildings.

Then we went into the house and had bread and hard but sweet butter and pork sausage and good white Schwalm wine. And we all sat down and drank and ate together. And chatted away very merrily in German-English with no interpreter but Peggy. And I cracked jokes in German, and all laughed at them. The daughter Anna Catharina was 31 that day, her *geburtstag!* The older boy—the *Kronprinz*—is Johannes and the second is Heinrich Claus. Dad's father was Hans Claus.

Next day I saw the church Dad went to and the churchyard where his father and mother are buried, but could not visit their graves, for here in the crowded little churchyards of the Schwalm, one occupies a grave for 30 years only, then someone else is buried there. The 'house' is the holy place, the place of tradition. Just before we left, I went into the bedroom and my cousin John Adam Fenner, pointing to the smaller bed said: '*Hier deine vater schlafen*'. Then to the big bed: '*Hier deine vater geboren*.' So there it was. I had got to Dad's birthplace as I had set out to do.

16 July 1937, Rotenburg and Niedergrenzebach

I have met four members of the Fenner family here. At Spangenberg the burgomeister is Theobald Fenner, cousin to Dr Carl of Hannover. A big man, fine home, pleasant wife, two sons, one daughter, and a glorious country home in the woods. I have photographs of his town house, nestling below the great *schloss*-crowned rock of Spangenberg. So up

there I had the longed-for pleasure of wandering in these woods, the beech and oak very beautiful, the pine and spruce woods ominously still and dark, and not easy to get along because of the lower dead branches of the trees. And we made pleasant family contacts, and learnt a little more German. Peg does quite well. And Dr Daniel Fenner and his very alert and charming *frau* were there to put us right.

And then off on a very long drive to Ziegenhain and Niedergrenzebach in the valley of the Schwalm, where the folk movement, and love of home, and retention of the old costumes, is so strong. And we went to the house where the first Fenner of record lived in the fifteenth century in the centre of the double-walled, moated, part of Ziegenhain. And we got Schwälmer books and cards. For each member of the family comments to us on my being an unmistakable member of the Fenner family—Spangenberg Fenner knew me as a Fenner before he knew who I was at all. So we are just transplanted Schwälmers—all the family.

And I went to my father's home, and I wandered in his church and churchyard, and saw the graves of Fenners, and on the church walls saw the honour rolls with the Fenner names for the war of 1814 (Waterloo etc.) and for the wars of the 1860s and 1870s, and for the war of 1914–18. In the Napoleonic wars three Fenners, two Johannes sen. and jun. In the last war three. And I thought of the honour rolls at home in Talbot and Dunach [in Victoria], with Fenners in them too. And I agreed with Adam Fenner, when he hoped that no more would members of our family and of those still in Germany be opposite to one another in the trenches. A nephew of his was in the German trenches opposite the place where my brother Tom was killed in August 1916, or thereabouts. And so it goes. Alongside two of the names of the 1814 honour roll were pinned the medals won on the field. There they have hung quiet and untouched for a century. And in the Fenner garden I brought a piece of stone for memory of Dad, who had loved it all so much, but not so much that when the land became Prussian he left, for he would not become a Prussian soldier. Or so they say. I do not know.

Dad asked me if I ever I visited Germany to go to his mother's grave—for him. For her death before he returned to see her was the bitterest thing in his life. And so I found the place of the Fenner family—an area—no stones, in the old churchyard. And we went and saw the old Fenner home of 1453—*Die Unser Liebe Frauen Kolben*—and saw the old lady Fenner, with 17 generations of occupancy—500 years—of that one house. And I more than ever was sorry I had not been able—with Peg who is of the Fenner family—to attend the *Sippentag* (kinship day). I hope that some day Frank will come and he will be able to speak German also, and

that will be ever so much better. Whatever wars may happen in between, and God forbid they may be between Germany and us, he will find that these family bonds are stronger than anything that war may harm. And he will get a warm welcome from all. Dad did not tell me much of his home. But one thing I recall well. He often showed me the blue cornflower and revealed that he was always touched by the memory of this emblematic flower of his home.

We went and saw the homes of four other Fenners in Niedergrenzebach and the places where my father's sister lived, and much more interesting family history. And there was a long drive home, by basalt, and *muschelkalk*, and *rotsandstein*, and so on. For my cousin Dr Daniel is a geologist also. The name Rotenburg is from the reddish soils of the *Rotsandstein*? Upper Cretaceous.

17 July 1937, Rotenburg/Fulda

At 2pm we set off in the car. Took Dr Daniel Fenner and his wife Caroline and his *zwei söhne und eine tochter*, away up the valley of the Fulda, through villages old and new, to Bad Hersfeld. These *Bads* (watering and bathing places, like Bath) are all over Germany. Have visited or seen several. They are always very pleasant and restful places. It is no wonder folk take 'the cure' there.

First we went to the Kursaal. We got an English dictionary from the waiter who spoke good English. Then we sat down for a family gathering. There were ten Fenners, six of the direct line, and four *frauen*. All were descended directly from the Grebe (*grabe*) line of Fenners. Burgomeister Johannes Jost Fenner, who built the old home at Niedergrenzebach, or rebuilt it, in 1742 (I forget the date, but it is carved on the foundation stone and on the beam over the door and you may read it for yourself some day, *mes enfants*). Of the six Fenners present, four were doctors of university standing. Dr Daniel, Dr Heinrich, Dr Emilie (the cleverest of the lot, from Berlin) and Dr Charles (the exotic member). Eckhard is a *pfarrer* (parson) of good standing, and Christian is a *Buchhandler* of degree. So the Fenner line, which in essentials was a farming line, has in our case blossomed out into other paths. There have been bishops and generals and engineers also, but they are farther removed.

Eckhard Fenner, a clever fellow, well learned in architecture and philology and history, but not so much so as Dr Emilie, wrote out (quite from memory) a lineal table to show that we are all descended from Johann Jost — also from Kurt 1648 (also from Oswald Fenner 1400 and something). And I have photos of the original crests of the family of 1555 (one flag) and of 1698 (two flags). And all this gives one an interest in

heredity and a pride in the stability and sanity and soundness of one's ancestors, without any unnecessary and inappropriate swank about it. I am very sorry that I could not get to the Pfingsten celebration of the Fenner Family (*Sippentag*, May 16) at my father's own old home village of Niedergrenzebach, but this smaller *sippentag* at Hersfeld, where we and our *frauen* ate and drank and walked and talked together made up for it. First at the Kursaal, then to the Gardens where we 'took the waters' and had our photos taken. Peg wanted me to be taken drinking a glass of water as a surprise for the family. And we talked of all the other Fenners and who they were and how they were related, and what their characters were, and they all agreed that on face value alone I was a Fenner, with many family characteristics. Then when we had drunk from the Lullus spring (Lullus was a missionary who founded Hersfeld) we went over to the great ruins of the once magnificent church of Hersfeld, and discussed its arches and styles and carvings and history from AD 736, when it was first built (heathen temple there before) to 1100 and when it was rebuilt until Napoleon's time, when it was destroyed to its present magnificent ruins. After 1700 however it had been deserted because under Phillip of Grossemüttige (1504-67), who gave the first Fenner crest, in the 1500s the rise of Protestantism had been so great. Phillip was one of the two powerful friends of Martin Luther and helped to establish the Reformation. Phillip also had two wives. We were in the home of the second one yesterday. Then to the Rathskeller where we dined heartily on Kalbschnitzel and gherkins and rye *brot* and beer. And then *Aufwiedersehen*. And we left for home very late and a long way to drive. But it was another look at the beauty of the German landscapes by moonlight through the blue mists.

Hirt Family History

So-called 'genealogies', as commemorated in *Hessisches Geschlechterbuch* (1971) and the Fenner *Sippentags*, are lop-sided, since they trace the history of the male line only. It has been much more difficult to find out much about my mother's ancestors. As related below, Father married Emma Louise Hirt on 4 January, 1911. Mother was born at Narracan, in Gippsland, Victoria, on 19 August 1883. Her father, Johannes Gottlieb Hirt, was born in Silesia about 1825 and migrated to California and then Australia. He died in 1898. Silesia (German Schlesien) was an old Polish province which became a possession of the Bohemian crown in 1355, passed with that crown to the Austrian Habsburgs in 1526, was taken by Prussia in 1742 and returned to Poland in 1945. Her mother, whose surname was Kaiser, was born in Dreysa, a village near Bautzen, in Saxony, and migrated to Australia at the age of 15. They married in 1859 and she died in 1934. Some other female members of the Kaiser family had migrated to South Australia and

married other Germans, including several Kleinigs, in the Angaston region in South Australia. As children, Lyell, Winn and I (Frank) used to stay on the farm of one of the Kleinigs at Ebenezer, near Tanunda, during school holidays. When father and mother visited Europe in 1931 it was not possible for them to visit Silesia but they made a point of finding the village (in Saxony) where my maternal grandmother was born. I have extracted the comments set out below from father's diary of their 1931 trip.

Extracts from Charles Fenner's 1931 Diary

29 October 1931, Drehsa

We got up at 7.20 this morning and by 9.20 were at the Haupt Bahnhof to catch our train for Bautzen. Got a fine detailed map of this and Dresden, including Drehsa, and this was most helpful in our quest for the birthplace of *grandmutter*. The way out was very beautiful, as always in this lovely, fertile, much-used and long settled land. Peg does not think it was as pretty as the Marburg country but I think it was. The fields were usually larger, there was a much greater area of woods, the tops of hills were mostly woods, forests, beautifully kept, here of fir and pine, with borders of beech and birch—a few larch and spruce. The fields are fenceless, with the usual small square stones as 'land-marks' between properties. A church on the cot or saddle of the low hills. Villages nestling along the ever-running streams or on the hillsides. Most beautiful. We also passed huge paper mills and great breweries.

At long last we got to Bautzen, a huge fine town. Castles, fortresses, river, market-places, museums, theatres, fine streets—a big town we should call it. There are scores and scores of villages around it. We got a taxi. The lad, who was not smart or shaven, did not impress us favourably at first. In fact, at one stage, out in the country, when both he and we thought we were lost, we were just a bit scared. And indeed, he had us quite at his mercy. He did not understand one word of English, and but little of our combined German. However, we got to the long-talked-of Drehsa. We had found, at last, the village that Peggy had sought, where her mother was born. A pretty little place, large houses of the *alte haus* type, crowded together along the stream, and dominated by the *Schloss* (castle) of some Duke. We drove to the schoolhouse, and spoke to several people. They were not so smiling and sunny as those in other parts. Perhaps in these outback villages those who speak English are still hated as enemies. But one woman was very nice. The women and men we saw everywhere as they worked in the fields. One got a fine idea of what is meant by a 'peasant people'. We went to the school. No-one there. It was not the school that *grandmutter* went to, but we

were on the roads she trod, and the woods and the fields where she played.

Then the schoolteacher came. Some one had sent for her. Such a nice, rosy-cheeked, strong and hearty girl, from Berlin. She liked Drehsa for 'a little while'. She complimented Peggy on her German and the two chattered away like magpies. She took us to a man's house, and he told us where Peter Kaiser, the *Burgomeister* had lived, and where Georg Kaiser, *Burgomeister* also, had lived. But now the Kaisers do not live there. So we went to see it, and took photos of it—the house where *grandmutter* had been a girl with her brothers and sisters, four of whom had gone to Australia, and she the only one left. And I photographed the geese in the lane by the house and the stream and the street. There are no fences; one walks to one house through another, as at Niedergrenzebach. Then we went up to the *Schloss*, and we said goodbye to the little pleasant Berliner teacher and we set off back.

The Fenner Coat-of-Arms

On a subsequent trip, in 1937, my father had met a cousin, Dr Daniel Fenner, who was very interested in the family history and organized some of the early post-World War II *Sippentags*. Daniel Fenner had constructed an abbreviated history of the Fenners of Niedergrenzebach which goes back to 1465. My father belonged to the 17th generation; during this long period they had devised three versions of a 'coat-of-arms'; the final version is illustrated in Figure 12.3. Shortly after Fenner Hall had been named (after Frank Fenner) as a residential college of The Australian National University in Canberra in 1992, its governing council agreed to accept this as their emblem, used on the entrance to the building (Figure 12.4).

In July 1949, Bobbie and I came to England from the Rockefeller Institute in New York and bought a car, a Ford Prefect, which we collected within a week of arriving in England. After driving around Britain and much of Europe, in October we came to Germany, where we had already established links with some German relatives. We drove, with my second cousin Dr Otto Fenner, to Niedergrenzebach and saw the Fenner house for ourselves.

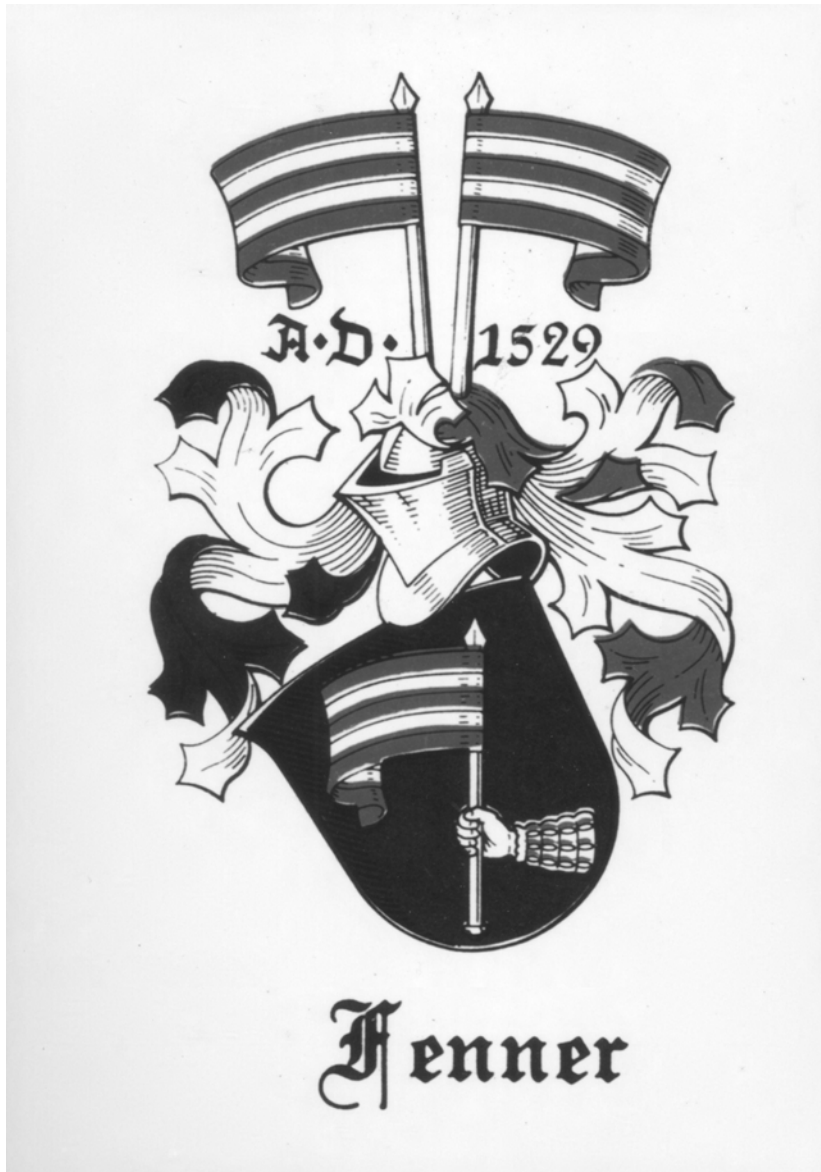


Figure 12.3. The Fenner coat-of-arms

'This escutcheon was given to Ekkhardt Fenner, Actuary of the Landgrave Philipp of Hessen in Marburg as a reward for his services on the occasion of the famous discourse between Luther and Zwingli in Marburg in 1525.' The original is in the castle archives in Marburg.



Figure 12.4. Fenner Hall, The Australian National University, Canberra

Notice at the entrance on Northbourne Avenue.

References

- Fenner, C. 1931, MS178/6/3A5 (1931 diary) Basser Library, Australian Academy of Science. Also lodged in PRG 372: papers of Dr C. A. E. Fenner, held in the Mortlock Library of South Australiana.
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