

Hallers Netz. Ein europäischer Gelehrtenbriefwechsel zur Zeit der Aufklärung
Reviewed by Ulrich Johannes Schneider

Martin Stuber, Stefan Hächler and Luc Lienhard (eds), *Hallers Netz. Ein europäischer Gelehrtenbriefwechsel zur Zeit der Aufklärung*, *Studia Halleriana*, vol. 9, Basel: Schwabe. 2005, pp. x, 592, illus., SFr 98.00, €68.50 (hardback 3-7965-1327-1).

Almost 400 illustrations make this 600-page study look like a catalogue. However, the pictures provide additional material, some as illustrations, depicting people with whom Swiss super-scholar Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777) exchanged letters, some charting the network Haller was putting in place first in Göttingen and later in Switzerland. More than thirty schematic maps merit special attention, even if they all show Europe in an identical frame. Dots in different shapes and shades tell us about the quantity and the quality of the correspondence, not only of Haller, but also of contemporary scientists, in order to enable comparison.

Haller was, by any standard, a very prolific writer, not only of letters. He published 24 books in 50 volumes, many of which he reworked for second editions; he wrote 450 essays, 9000 book reviews, and edited another 52 volumes. Of his letters exchanged with 1139 male and 50 female correspondents, close to 17,000 have survived. He was a professor of anatomy, botany and surgery at Göttingen University from 1736 to 1753, and later had different political functions in his native town of Bern where he returned in 1753. His work includes studies in natural philosophy, physiology, medicine, botany, and also poetry—all of which are discussed in his correspondence. The fact that, today, we know so much about Haller is due to the work of Swiss researchers who, with the present book, are completing their ninth volume of the series ‘*Studia Halleriana*’.

The previously published volumes of this series were devoted to individual correspondences (vols. 1, 3–5), Haller's Paris diary (vol. 2), and one of his books (vol. 6). Other volumes give a complete bibliography of Haller's works (vol. 8) and a repertory of his correspondence between 1724 and 1777 (vol. 7). Volume 9 is a study of several aspects of this correspondence including a bird's eye view of it all. This “general analysis” of Haller's correspondence fills the first 200 pages (chapters 1 to 10, written by the three editors). The second part (chapters 11 to 19) provides 300 pages of case studies with a wide variety of topics, for example, the definition of illness, the use of different languages, problems of economy, cataloguing Swiss flora, tele-diagnostics. In this second part, every chapter has its own author including, in addition to the editors, Urs Boschung, Barbara Braun-Bucher, David Krebs, Claudia Profus, and Hubert Steinke. The extensive bibliography and the annotated index of names make this book very useful indeed.

Haller was very keen on establishing contacts through the exchange of letters, especially in his capacity as a medical doctor. When he was only twenty-one, he wrote a note saying that new inventions and publications depended upon extensive correspondence among experts, and he added that it was also most interesting to see the personality and talent of the writers revealed in letters (p. 49). Within Haller's net there were 286 medical doctors of whom over 4000 letters from 200 different places have survived. We learn from the book (pp. 127ff.) that this correspondence was not entirely professional, but touched many themes, such as when Antoine de Haen from Vienna discussed an imminent penury with Haller. Some fellow doctors needed letters of introduction, others sought advice for their patients (who also sometimes wrote directly to Haller). Most doctors who stuck to medical topics lived in Switzerland; contacts farther away often had less thematic restrictions.

An essay by Stefan Hächler in the second part investigates the practice of “tele-medicine” in the eighteenth century. If, for instance, the treatment of an eye-illness took a long time (doctors waiting for one eye to heal before the other underwent surgery), this time was filled with consultations by letter. When in 1761 in Paris a new method of cataract surgery was practised, Haller participated directly via letters exchanged before and immediately after the operation with a doctor he had suggested in the first place. In this, as in other cases, surgeons and doctors quite often included a detailed account of an illness when writing to Haller, asking for a consultation.

What Hächler adds to those observations is somewhat typical of this volume as a whole: he completes the analysis of the content of the letters with a statistical survey, enriching his essay by diagrams answering the following questions: how many first consultations did Haller give, and how many on average? What profession did those have who asked for his medical opinion? What country did they come from? The database established for the Swiss project (which is also online: <http://www.haller.unibe.ch>, but in German only) has been prepared for this kind of search. Even if, in the case of the medical correspondents, the sample comprises only 152 letters (70 of which were from doctors or university professors of medicine; 75 of which came from outside Switzerland, etc.), the insight provided by quantitative evaluation is telling. It helps one understand the eighteenth-century culture of producing and exchanging information via letters, which is often overlooked because its traces are hidden away in archives. With the steady progress of the Swiss researchers, at least Haller's net can no longer be overlooked.