

6-1-2006

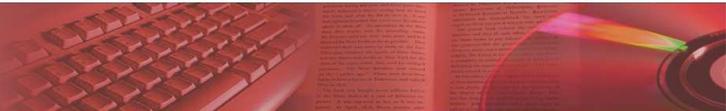
Review: Hubert Steinke, *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750-90* (Amsterdam and New York, 2005)

Andre Wakefield
Pitzer College

Recommended Citation

Andre Wakefield. Review of Steinke, Hubert, *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750-90*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11872>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Pitzer Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pitzer Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.



Hubert Steinke. *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750-90.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005. 354 pp. \$97.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-1852-5.

Reviewed by Andre Wakefield

Published on H-German (June, 2006)

An Irritating Book Review

This is a big book about a narrow subject. It is emphatically not a “general history of the idea of irritation and irritability” (p. 279). Rather, Hubert Steinke focuses on Albrecht von Haller’s concept of irritability and sensibility and the reception of that concept in latter half of the eighteenth century. I certainly don’t want to suggest that this is an unimportant or uninteresting subject. Haller is a fascinating figure, and it is nice to have a substantial English-language account of his anatomical and physiological investigations. But this book is not for everyone.

For those of in need of a refresher, Albrecht von Haller was Swiss. He was also one of those annoyingly precocious prodigies (like John Stuart Mill) who knew more languages than you do by the time he was five. He studied with Boerhaave at Leiden and received his degree in medicine before his twentieth birthday. Haller then returned to practice as a physician in his native Bern, where he developed an international reputation as a botanist, anatomist and poet before accepting a call to the new University of Göttingen in 1736.

Steinke’s story really begins in Göttingen. After reviewing theories of animal motion before 1750, he moves on to a detailed analysis of Haller’s physiological experiments in the Göttingen laboratory. For my money, this is the strongest part of the book. Steinke draws extensively on laboratory notebooks to reconstruct experimental practice in Haller’s laboratory. The notebooks he uses have never been studied, and this section does indeed shed new light on what Haller was actually doing; that information, in turn, changes the way one interprets the conceptual framework that grew out of Haller’s experimental practice. Given Haller’s prominence in the history of medicine, it may seem surprising that his Göttingen lab notebooks have been ignored until now, but such neglect is a re-

flection of broad changes in the history of science and medicine, which have increasingly turned their attention toward experimental practice. In Steinke’s case, this approach has yielded some impressive results. He is able to demonstrate, for example, that some of Andrew Cunningham’s recent claims about eighteenth-century physiology simply do not hold true in Haller’s case. In fact, it appears that some of the features scholars have considered typical of modern experimental physiology (that is, nineteenth-century physiology) were already present in Haller’s laboratory.

Steinke’s reconstruction of Haller’s experimental practice reveals that something unique may have happened in his Göttingen lab around 1750. Unlike most of his colleagues, Haller expected his students to write their own dissertations; he even expected them to perform their own experiments as part of those dissertation theses, which was atypical. In general, Steinke’s reconstruction suggests that Haller’s laboratory was a very intense and unusual place. A small group of committed students gathered there to perform experiments—often excruciatingly painful animal vivisections. Given the hours spent, and the nature of the experiments, it is not surprising that Haller’s approach gave rise to a unique laboratory culture. Steinke also suggests that Haller played favorites, and that he was (unsurprisingly) authoritarian in his attitudes. More interestingly, the laboratory culture he promoted in Göttingen created the basis for a larger network of correspondents and acolytes throughout Europe, which Steinke describes in great detail (chapter 4).

In general, as Steinke himself points out, this book is a methodological hybrid. He wants to retain the strengths of a more traditional conceptual analysis while integrating the insights and methods of the

newer science studies, which tend to focus less on the structure of concepts and more on experimental practice and social structures. It is a tempting compromise, but it has its weaknesses. Among these is a certain lack of coherence; it can be disorienting to move from a detailed conceptual analysis in one chapter to a detailed local account of experimental practice in the next. The vexing question, of course, is whether and how these two realms relate to one another.

Nevertheless, this is a valuable study. It is meticulously researched and, in general, clearly written. It will provide a rich resource for specialists in the history of early modern medicine. But there are also useful bits and pieces here for the non-specialist, like the discussion of expertise and the public sphere in the final chapter.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Andre Wakefield. Review of Steinke, Hubert, *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750-90*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11872>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.