

6-1-2010

Review: Karin Hartbecke, Zwischen Fürstenwillkür und Menschheitswohl: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz als Bibliothekar

Andre Wakefield
Pitzer College

Recommended Citation

Wakefield, Andre. "Review: Karin Hartbecke (Editor). Zwischen Fürstenwillkür und Menschheitswohl: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz als Bibliothekar." *Isis* 101.2 (June 2010): 429-430. doi: 10.1086/655715

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.

makes an explicit appearance in Chapters 1, 2, and 10, where Emerson frankly discusses the authors who have inspired or incensed him over the years.

The book also addresses a number of finer points that add color to the life of David Hume. While Emerson's summaries of Hume's positions may not be as streamlined as those offered in today's philosophy courses, they are faithful to the concepts that were important to Hume's own contemporaries. In this sense we get the Hume of the eighteenth century, and not the Hume constructed by analytic philosophers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout Chapters 5 to 8, Emerson points out that since Hume made few converts during his lifetime, it stands to reason that historians should ask why this was the case, especially in relation to the reading habits and travels to the Continent that shaped his intellectual development. Focusing on these kinds of topics allows Emerson to mention neglected facets of Hume's thoughtlike associationism and to examine how Hume's training as a historian led him to be interested in specific kinds of philosophical problems. In particular, we are offered a nuanced picture of how Hume the historian affected Hume the epistemologist. For example, though Hume lived during the largest explosion of print since the invention of the hand press, he was keen to read every author that he cited in his multivolume *History of England*. He even went so far as to tell his publisher, "there is not a Quotation that I did not see with my own Eyes, except two or three at most" (p. 123). This undoubtedly required a lot of reading. While Emerson rightly points out that this statement should be taken with some salt, this exegetical principle of distrust is a very good example of how Hume's historical research worked directly in conversation with his skepticism.

It has been said that the methods used by historians oscillate between the poles of lumping and splitting. Emerson's bibliographic methods over the years have led him to write some very impressive essays of the former variety. Indeed, the set of articles about the Edinburgh Philosophical Society that he published in the *British Journal for the History of Science* in 1979, 1981, and 1985 is now a standard reference point for anyone working on Scotland's intellectual history. They collectively present an indispensable list of the institution's fellows and explain the social context that led to the formation of the society. This kind of invaluable collation is continued throughout Emerson's *Essays*. Indeed, many of the points that he makes about Hume's historical sources are clearly

based on a detailed database that he made of all the books cited by Hume in *The History of England* (alas, the list was not included as an appendix). Emerson's skill as a collector of historical data, however, is most clearly evinced in Chapters 3, 4, and 9, where he calculates how many Scots could be considered "Enlightened," lists the kinds of books read by Scottish students, and estimates the number of "medics" operating in Scotland from 1700 to 1799. While the work in all three of these essays represents Emerson's fine eye for detail, his research in the chapter on Scotland's community of medical professions notably revises the low, and unrealistic, number of Scottish physicians, apothecaries, and surgeons listed in Peter and Ruth Wallis's *Eighteenth-Century Medics* (1988). By their count, there were only 1,750. But Emerson concludes that the number was closer to 5,500 and that there were an additional 8,400 "outsiders" who studied medical topics in Scotland. Granted, some of the calculations are a bit dizzying in places, but this sixty-page chapter of tables and analysis is likely to be the most thorough treatment of the topic to date and, as such, it will be an important resource for historians of medicine and the allied sciences for years to come.

M. E. EDDY

Karin Hartbecke (Editor). *Zwischen Fürstentwillkür und Menschheitswohl: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz als Bibliothekar*. (Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie Sonderbände, 95.) 277 pp., illus., index. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2008. €79 (cloth).

The title of this volume—at least the part before the colon—is misleading. This is not really a book about the tension between human welfare and absolute monarchy. It is instead an extended effort to reconstruct Leibniz's practices of categorizing and acquiring books; it is also about the relationship between Leibniz's written reflections on categorizing books and those practices.

Karin Hartbecke's long chapter on Leibniz's early years as court librarian in Hanover forms the heart of the volume. She begins her story in December of 1676 when Leibniz officially took over as court librarian in Hanover. Her essay attempts to reconstruct his activities during the early years of his office. Despite the hagiographical tendencies of some early accounts, Hartbecke makes it clear that the universal genius had his problems at the library; his career there consisted of a long series of "unfulfilled plans, frustrations and blunders" (p. 45). Nor

was he especially attached to his office. (Leibniz was always looking for a better gig.) She concludes, based on the “untypical acquisition profile” of the ducal library between 1676 and 1679, that Leibniz’s own scholarly interests had a noticeable impact on the collection, even if his acquisitions did not always mirror his research interests. In other words, the library itself represents a physical vestige of the tension between Leibniz’s presumed interests in science and general welfare on the one side, and the duke’s sovereign and dynastic interests on the other.

Hartbecke and several of the other contributors spend considerable effort trying to reconstitute the original ducal library as it existed in Leibniz’s time. This is no small thing. Parts of that collection have been scattered far and wide and its reconstitution involves bibliographical pyrotechnics like *Verlinkung* with numerous *Online-Databanken* (p. 57). But this virtual reconstruction of the original collection, the Holy Grail of library history, is unattainable at present. Its potential success depends on completion of the ongoing “Leibniz Edition” (the collected writings), which is still decades away.

For those willing to suffer through long methodological excursions on bibliographical sleuthing techniques, there will be gems of discovery. Did you know, for example, that one room of the duke’s library was situated directly across from his private dining room? Since Leibniz lived and slept near the books, this gave him privileged access to the intimate sphere of the sovereign. But such tidbits can be few and far between. For those interested in material like this, existing standard works by Werner Ohnsorge and Günter Scheel remain the best point of entry.

Stephan Waldhoff’s contribution stands out from the rest. He does not try to reconstitute old collections; nor does he try to connect Leibniz’s library work to better-known topics such as the universal characteristic. Instead, he maintains a skeptical distance about heroic narratives that place Leibniz at the beginning of important innovations in library science. Did Leibniz inspire the Dewey decimal system? For Waldhoff, that claim is no more than a fable. Did Leibniz really influence library practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even in Hanover? “The suspicion arises that the reception of the library theorist Leibniz among modern library historians has been livelier than was his influence on contemporary librarians” (p. 238). Case in point: after Leibniz’s death, the library records were such a mess that it was not even possible to separate his private books from those of the elector. Leibniz’s career as librarian was marked by fascinating visions of possible worlds that

remained unrealized. In this, it bears a striking resemblance to other parts of his academic and professional life.

ANDRE WAKEFIELD

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Series 7: *Mathematische Schriften*, Vol. 5: 1674–1676. *Infinitesimalmathematik*. Edited by **Uwe Mayer; Siegmund Probst; Heike Sefrin-Weis.** Foreword by **Herbert Breger**. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008. €258 (cloth).

The *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* of Leibniz is divided into eight series. The seventh one is dedicated to mathematics and volumes four and five of that series include the first texts about infinitesimal calculus. They were all written when Leibniz lived in Paris from 1673 to 1676. There he met Christiaan Huygens who encouraged him to read Pascal and Grégoire de Saint-Vincent. Right at the beginning of that French period, from the end of January 1673 to the end of February, he spent some time in England and met Henry Oldenburg. At that time Newton had already written his treatise on fluxions, and in 1676 he would exchange a few letters with Leibniz through Oldenburg. Those are the factual reasons to suspect Leibniz of plagiarism. But the reasons to clear him of that crime are now published in Volume 5 where Herbert Breger writes in his foreword: “Wenn Leibniz nach einem Prioritätsstreit von zweieinhalb Jahrhunderten uneingeschränkt die selbständige und unabhängige Formulierung der Infinitesimalrechnung zuerkannt wird, so beruht dieses Urteil letztlich auf den hier gedruckten Dokumenten. [If after a quarrel of priority that has lasted two and a half centuries, it is generally acknowledged that Leibniz formulated infinitesimal calculus autonomously and independently, then this judgement is ultimately based on the texts published in this volume.]” (P. xv.)

The volume is composed of ninety-eight items of which only ten were previously published, and none by Leibniz. The remaining eighty-eight pieces, in which Leibniz elaborated infinitesimal calculus, are published here for the first time. Fifty-six of these were dated by Leibniz himself, evidence of the importance he attributed to this work.

Emphasis is made, by Uwe Mayer and Siegmund Probst in their introduction, on the literature Leibniz had at his disposal, on the books he owned, and on the notes he wrote in their margins. The marginal notes he made to Fabri’s *Synopsis geometrica*, to Huygens’s *Horologium oscillatorium*, and to Ricci’s *Logarithmotechnia*