



Katrin Böhme-Kaßler. *Gemeinschaftsunternehmen Naturforschung: Modifikation und Tradition in der Gesellschaft Naturforschender Freunde zu Berlin 1773-1906.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005. 218 S. EUR 39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08722-3.



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Mingling in the

Thirty years ago, Sally Gregory Kohlsted demonstrated that historical research can profit enormously from taking a closer look at nineteenth-century societies of natural history. Her example was Boston, Massachusetts, but her findings could and still can be read in a transnational context. The transformations of such societies from small circles of friends to major public institutions and their inherent tendencies to accumulate knowledge and collect objects of all kinds turned natural history associations into hubs of public knowledge and made them indispensable outlets for creating new forms of sociability centered on interests in the natural world.[1] These developments did not simply unfold smoothly or without interruptions. Significant conflicts emerged between the powerful tendencies to professionalize knowledge production and administer it at research-oriented institutions (which then claimed the authority to interpret the natural world), and enduring efforts to cultivate popular science and disseminate scientific knowledge to larger audiences. In Europe, such tensions could be traced back in many ways, though not exclusively, to the late Enlightenment, which wanted to promote knowledge for many, but re-

mained restricted, intellectually as in its social basis, to the emerging *Bürgerertum*.

Böhme-Kaßler picks up on such questions, yet not within any transnational or even transatlantic framework.[2] She concentrates on the Gesellschaft Naturforschender Freunde zu Berlin, founded in 1773 and as such one of the oldest and longest surviving associations for the study of natural history in Germany. Her work is meant to be a micro-historical investigation into the changing relationship between scientific thinking, *bürgerliche* cultural practices, and the institutionalization of knowledge during the decades from the Enlightenment to the early twentieth century. The author ends her story with the year 1906, although the Gesellschaft continued to exist for much longer. She argues that at that point the society had lost its original imprint, not least because it had sold its house in the centrally located Friedrichstrasse and surrendered its rich natural history collections. Within this time-frame, Böhme-Kaßler delineates the intellectual, social, and institutional profile of this private society within Berlin's rapidly expanding market of *Wissenschaft*, in which the older Royal

Academy, other newly founded private societies for the study of natural sciences, and, from 1810 on, the Berlin University, competed for resources and public attention. All this discussion is managed in eight chapters of concise prose totaling less than 140 pages of text—a refreshing and much welcome exception to the now-common practice of German dissertations going on for hundreds of pages. The author also includes a selection of transcribed archival sources as well as illustrations. This book offers a much-needed, in-depth case study—in fact, one of the best available—on the still relatively unexplored area of the history of natural history associations in Germany.

The strengths as well as some of the limitations of this study derive from its focus on the archival sources of the society itself. As explained in the beginning of the book, the author played an instrumental role in a two-year project that reviewed the society’s archival holdings and made them accessible to scholars. The results of this endeavor are certainly impressive. This almost ideal source pool allowed BÄ¶hmer-KaÄler to trace internal discussions and document the members’ persistence in maintaining their original mission: to provide a socially amenable forum for a circle of natural history enthusiasts. The close reading of some key documents, such as the “basic constitution” (*Grundverfassung*) and the drafts of the society’s seal, supports the author’s main arguments: At its onset, the Berlin group was deeply influenced by masonic thinking and rituals and some of its early members were, not surprisingly, Free Masons. This overlap fostered the society’s inclination to understand the exploration of natural history as both a rational and a spiritual exercise meant to unravel the mysteries of nature and linking the secular language of empirical research with the symbolism of serving God through worship in the “temple of nature.” BÄ¶hmer-KaÄler even attributes the closed quality of the group to masonic influences; it limited the number of its *ordentliche* members, equipped with the privilege of setting policies and regulating the finances, to twelve, even as the total membership, including so-called honorary members, climbed to 1250 by the year 1906. The line between “private” and “public” spaces thus ran through the society itself. Only from the 1830s did the society begin to open its internal sessions to honorary members and guests. By this time, it realized that its inner circle alone could not sustain continuous operation.

The society’s leadership remained stubborn in other regards, however. It refused to address themes arising from the experimental sciences, and it hesitated for decades to give up its costly housing. Nevertheless,

BÄ¶hmer-KaÄler is cautious in criticizing the society for its elitist character and increasing isolation from Berlin’s urban *Wissenschaft*. One of the important insights to be gained from her work concerns the value of tradition-building. By maintaining its collections and the ritual of having new members sign the “basic constitution” for so long, the society paradigmatically demonstrated that natural history associations in the nineteenth century self-consciously invented their own traditions and legitimated their existence through their own historicity.

In those passages dealing with eighteenth-century Free Masonry, the dialectical relationship between curiosity and mystery, and the importance of tradition-building, the author draws on newest historical research to situate her findings in broader historical contexts.[3] But this choice is prescribed by her specific source materials, and she falls short of providing a broader, continuous grounding for her story throughout the book. In this regard, her understandable enthusiasm for the sources documenting the society’s internal dealings might have impeded a more vigorous examination of some developments that would help keep the larger picture in mind. Two examples concerning both the chronology and the thematic potential of her topic may illustrate these limitations. First, the decades between 1840 and 1890 remain surprisingly nebulous in their significance for the society. It was during this period, however, that Berlin saw the rise of empirical physical sciences and experienced the heyday of the city’s university science, represented by such figures as Rudolf Virchow, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, and Wilhelm Foerster, who left the society some time after having been admitted as an *ordentliches* member. During that period, too, Berlin became a huge marketplace for efforts to popularize science, a tendency that did not stop at the doors of the Royal Academy or the University. All natural history associations in Germany needed to adapt to these new circumstances, which called into question the “descriptive” feature of the old natural history as well as the socially confined character of their membership. Beyond the 1830s, BÄ¶hmer-KaÄler’s monograph leaves such challenges unexplored.

Second, her observations about the linkage between rationalism and sensuality during the society’s founding phase, when empiricism, religious beliefs, and masonic mysticism were closely connected, are too easily subsumed under the category of “deism” and not extended into the later periods. They remain isolated and bound to the founding personality, Friedrich Heinrich Wilhelm Martini (1729-78). This narrow view prevents the study from testing the myth of a seemingly secular science in

the nineteenth century itself. Was the pursuit of natural history really geared toward “purer Erkenntnisgewinn” (p.136) at the end of this century? Why did the analogy between micro- and macro-cosmos, which the author locates early in the group’s history, survive well into the twentieth-century and flourish particularly in natural history literature at the fin-de-si cle? The intellectual amalgam of rationalism and mystical beliefs found in the 1770s underwent its own transformations and went beyond the deism of the Enlightenment. In the early nineteenth century, the writings of Gustav Theodor Fechner and others again promoted such pantheistic, cosmic, and holistic ideas. By the 1840s this amalgam became particularly attractive for free-religious groups, for whom the study of natural history meant a heavenly revelation (among many others, Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster became familiar with such ideas in his youth). Last, but not least, a look at the British and American history of natural history thinking and associations might have been helpful to realize the potential and complexities of natural theology as a continuous factor shaping the social history of ideas about nature throughout the nineteenth century.[4] Seen from this perspective, the “Heimat- und damit Identit tsverlust” (p.117) that the author observes for the Berlin group around 1906 might not be attributed primarily to the sale of its house and the dissolution of its collections, but to a triple loss: defeat in competition with more resourceful institutions in Berlin; the lost chance to catch up on the newest developments in the physical sciences; but also separation from more popular strands of thinking that, ironically, could have been nourished by re-considering some of the intellectual traditions so dominant when the society was founded.

Such limitations notwithstanding, this book is a welcome addition to the literature on the history of associ-

ational life in Germany. It will serve particularly well the interests of those readers keen to learn more about the texture of this activity within natural history associations and want to learn about it in its most palpable, concrete forms.

Notes

[1]. Sally Gregory Kohlsted, “The Nineteenth-Century Amateur Tradition: The Case of the Boston Society of Natural History,” in *Science and its Public: The Changing Relationship*, ed. Herald Holton and William A. Blanpied (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 173-190; idem, “From Learned Society to Public Museum: The Boston Society of Natural History,” in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 386-406.

[2]. See Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Geselligkeit und Demokratie. Vereine und zivile Gesellschaft im transnationalen Vergleich 1750-1914* (G ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

[3]. For example, the author makes good use of recent works by Monika Neugebauer-W lk and Aleida and Jan Assmann.

[4]. See, as examples, John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Peter J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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