

André Hohenstein, Hubert Steinke, Martin Stuber, eds., in collaboration with Philippe Rogger. *Scholars in Action: The Practice of Knowledge and the Figure of the Savant in the 18th Century*. History of Science and Medicine Library/Scientific and Learned Cultures and Their Institutions Series. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 2 volumes. xl + 932 pp. \$318.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-24390-3.

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## Knowledge Made Human

The desire to be read—to have one’s knowledge and ideas made mobile, to circulate, and to meet with an appropriate audience—is, as *Scholars in Action* testifies, a long-standing one. For scholars at work in the eighteenth century, vital and venerable modes of epistolary communication were increasingly supplemented by a range of printed alternatives, not least learned periodicals which permitted a more rapid and far-reaching diffusion of knowledge through a globally distributed intellectual community numbering “at the very least 30,000 active citizens” (p. 73). Anxiety as to one’s status as a citizen within the Republic of Letters often centered upon the mobility and visibility of one’s knowledge. In that respect, very little separates the savants, *philosophes*, and proto-scientists of the eighteenth century from contemporary academics. In an era, now, where the potential “impact” of one’s intellectual work depends upon its rapid sighting and citing by others, the value and desirability of the edited collection as a medium for the effective exchange of knowledge has been subject to debate. One recent contributor to the London School of Economics’ *Impact Blog* concluded, with tongue somewhat in cheek, that “researchers who write book chapters might as well bury the paper in a hole in their garden.”[1] *Scholars in Action* is, its contributors will be relieved to know, a robust and vibrant refutation of that assessment.

*Scholars in Action* emerges from a 2008 conference

organized at the University of Bern to mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of the Swiss scholar Albrecht von Haller (1708–77)—a man who, in his range of social, intellectual, and professional interests, represents something of the diversity of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters. That four-day conference, “Praktiken des Wissens und die Figur des Gelehrten im 18. Jahrhundert,” has resulted in a substantial and significant work of reference which will be of considerable interest to historians of science, book historians, historians of ideas, and historical geographers (among other disciplinary communities). Arranged over two volumes and more than nine hundred pages, the book consists of thirty-eight substantive chapters—divided between six thematic parts—together with a detailed introduction. The Bern conference and the publication of the book are events separated by half a decade: a fact that doubtless signals to the scale of the task assumed by collection’s editors.

The book’s almost forty chapters are linked by a common concern with the social history of knowledge making, management, and distribution during the eighteenth century and with individual scholars as “producers, bearers, and transmitters of knowledge” (p. 5). In attempting to capture something of the diversity of those individuals collectively referred to here as “scholars,” the net is cast widely (at least within Europe) to encompass clerics and magistrates, professional academics and lay enthusiasts,

and civil servants and travelers, among other groups. *Scholars in Action* is, in this sense, a significant work of prosopography—the book’s index of personal names runs to more than a thousand entries—which is attentive, among other things, to the means by which knowledge was obtained through travel, observation, and experimentation; evaluated and authorized by patrons, peers, and professional institutions; circulated in the form of specimens, printed books, and scholarly journals; and collected together in libraries, laboratories, and botanical gardens. Whilst the book’s thematic focus is not, in that sense, a novel one, the sheer variety, detail, and interest of the empirical examples presented affords a nuanced and compelling account of the sociology and geography of knowledge in the Age of Enlightenment.

One astonishing statistic, repeated more than once in the book, is that Albrecht von Haller wrote “some 9,000 reviews” of books and scholarly treatises during his career—a figure which affords not only an insight into his quotidian scholarly activities but is also an indication of quite how productive of new knowledge (and of new print) the eighteenth century was (p. 237). Although it is somewhat invidious to single out specific contributions to such a large collection of essays, those dealing in various ways with the making and circulation of knowledge in print are particularly important for what they have to say about the role of editors and publishers in managing authorship (as both a process and as a role) and in shaping and spreading information and ideas. The increasing significance of scholarly journals during this period—often published under the auspices of an institutional or professional authority—is shown to have been at once a response and a contribution to the perceived flood of new knowledge and information generated during this period. Scholarly periodicals served not only to make knowledge circulate but, as a consequence of emerging procedures of review and criticism, to evaluate and rank that knowledge. In this respect, eighteenth-century print culture informed, as it was informed by, social processes of evaluation and authorization.

Anxiety as to one’s authority as a scholar was, in the eighteenth century as it is now, a pervasive concern. How individuals sought to earn, claim, or demonstrate their authority through specific social, rhetorical, technical, and corporeal performances is a topic which links several of the collection’s chapters. What this book shows is that reputation and fame were often (albeit imprecisely) taken to be proxies for authority; the principles of objectivity and rationality for which the Enlightenment is presumed to stand were often secondary to ques-

tions of prestige, social standing, and political influence.

Perhaps inevitably, certain of the criticisms leveled at edited collections can be applied here: some chapters address the book’s thematic concerns more directly than do others; some contextual ground is covered more than once by chapters which, unavoidably, overlap to a degree; the whole offers a compelling summary of how we think now about the activity of scholarship in the eighteenth century, but does somewhat less to point at future directions. Whilst it might seem churlish to ask more from an editorial team whose task was, undoubtedly, herculean, the collection (whilst containing an index of personal names) lacks a thematic or subject index. Given the book’s chronological and thematic diversity, and the range of disciplinary audiences to which the collection speaks, such an index would have proved extremely helpful. Book historians will, for example, find much of interest in Hole Rößler’s discussion of frontispiece authorial portraits and Reinhart Siegert’s examination of title pages and prefaces in scholarly texts, but may struggle to find them without an index. Similarly, whilst a cumulative bibliography would have added considerable heft to an already large book, it would have added greatly to the collection’s value as a work of reference. Such criticisms aside—and given the fact that more than half of the contributors to *Scholars in Action* are from the German-speaking world—the editorial team and the collection’s authors deserve sincere praise for the work of translation and second-language writing herein displayed.

*Scholars in Action* is an important book, but also an expensive one: at €229.00 (US\$318.00), it is priced for university libraries or for those individuals with deep pockets. Given that individual chapters will undoubtedly become required reading for undergraduate and postgraduate students across a range of disciplines (most especially in the history of science), the collection’s likely status as a key work or reference is clear. Historians of geography and historical geographers will find much of value here, both generally (in relation to chapters dealing with the spaces and places of knowledge production, accumulation, and reception) and specifically (in relation, for example, to Martin Gierl’s account of the teaching of geography at the University of Göttingen in the second half of the eighteenth century). Geographers will be particularly conscious, however, of the collection’s Eurocentric focus in terms of its biographical subjects and will lament the fact that the contribution of those scholars at work beyond Europe, who made the Republic of Letters a global state, has not been addressed more directly.

Note

[1]. Dorothy Bishop, "How to Bury your Academic Writing," *The Impact Blog*, August 29, 2012, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/08/29/how-to-bury-your-academic-writing/>.

[//blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/08/29/how-to-bury-your-academic-writing/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/08/29/how-to-bury-your-academic-writing/).

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