

Historia Literaria in the Field

Cambridge Introduction

This paper is part of larger book project, tentatively entitled “Virtues of History: Facts, Passions, and the German Academic Community 1700-1900.” The book traces how German scholars from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century changed views of history and, in the process, of themselves and the academic community. Focusing upon practices of research and education, it shows how a renewed interest in historical differences and particularities paralleled the development of new professional personae within disciplines such as philosophy and history. At the same time, the book emphasizes how these new personae helped institutionalize and propagate modern academic ideals such as open-mindedness, disinterestedness, and objectivity.

The first part of the book focuses upon the Saxon philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655-1728). In the Anglophone world, Thomasius has until recently been almost unknown. The two first monographs on Thomasius, by Ian Hunter and Thomas Ahnert, appeared in 2006 and 2007. In Germany, Thomasius is traditionally considered the front-figure of the Early Enlightenment and given a status parallel to that of John Locke in Britain. My interest in Thomasius concerns his importance for the reform of German scholarship. I especially focus upon how the emergence of a new historical consciousness undermined older concepts of the Republic of Letters, ultimately rendering the metaphor meaningless. This paper is intended as the third chapter of the book, following a chapter on Thomasius and his reform program and another on his teaching practices. The paper discusses a group of young scholars, who travelled to Holland and wrote extensive notes regarding the Dutch underground.

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