

Editorial

Conrad Gessner 1516–2016

Gesnerus was established in 1943, in an age of “depressing circumstances”, as the editors of the first volume, Jean Strohl and Hans Fischer, called it. They were convinced that “in these difficult times the recollection of our patrimony represents a lively agent for upright attitude and a fruitful source of inner strength”. The idea of the journal was to make the heritage of Swiss scientists like Gessner, Paracelsus, Bernoulli, Euler, Haller, and others better known and to create a place for reflection on the common idealistic foundations of medicine and natural sciences. Gesnerus as a journal devoted primarily to the history of ideas would thus support the much needed efforts directed towards the envisaged unity of medical and scientific research.

In 1965, on occasion of the 400th anniversary of Gessner’s death, Gesnerus dedicated an issue to the Swiss scholar and inserted a full page in the manner of a commemorative plaque “in recollection of the great naturalist and physician, father of bibliography and universal historian”. The “number of commemoration” (*Erinnerungsheft*) presented Gessner’s contributions to the various areas of science and wanted to encourage young scholars to engage with the “tirelessly active, powerfully minded and faithful personality” (*unermüdlich tätige, geistesmächtige und glaubenstreue Persönlichkeit*) whose works and unpublished papers had not yet been studied sufficiently.

Today, at the time of the 500th anniversary of Gessner’s birth, the pathos accompanying these earlier commemorations has vanished. Gessner can no longer serve as a role model which encourages us in our search for identity and unity. To many historians of science and medicine, commemoration itself causes ambiguous feelings. It evokes the idea of laudatory speeches in an antiquarian manner but also the opportunity to explain modern approaches of research to a broader audience. It is, of course, the latter we have in mind when commemorating the man who gave his name to our journal. The biographical approach, the focus on paradigmatic figures and their thoughts, interests, contacts, actions, practices and works has recently become more and

more popular among historians as it is well suited to develop our understanding of science in its making and complexity. We hope to show with this issue that Gessner – still under-studied today – is a good case for that.

Vincent Barras, Hubert Steinke