

## BOOK REVIEWS

Robert B. Loudon, *Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education: Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. xiii + 226. ISBN 9781350163669 (hbk) £76.50

Jürgen Overhoff, *Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790). Aufklärer, Pädagoge, Menschenfreund. Eine Biographie*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020. Pp. 200. ISBN 9783835336193 (hbk) €16.00

In 2020, two biographies on the German educator and Enlightenment philosopher Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–90) were published, one in German by Jürgen Overhoff, the other in English by Robert B. Louden. The simultaneity of these new publications on the pedagogue, educator and philosopher, who has so far been little known outside the German-speaking world, presents a significant scholarly opportunity. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Basedow developed a conception of education transcending all national and denominational boundaries and he endeavoured to put it into practice by founding his own ‘school for philanthropists’ (*Schule für Menschenfreunde*), the Philanthropinum, in Dessau in 1774. In many respects, Basedow played a pioneering role in his field. This is due to his enormous productivity in writing but is also the fruit of his efforts to put his observations into practice, and by reporting and reflecting on it.

In addition to promoting contemporary interest in Basedow, these two books are timely in light of the 300th anniversary of Basedow’s birth and the approaching 250th anniversary of the foundation of the Philanthropinum in Dessau. Louden’s biography and accompanying presentation of Basedow’s writings closes a long-standing gap in scholarship for the Anglophone world while Overhoff’s slimmer biography provides a well-researched introduction to Basedow’s life and work. Both aim to award Basedow his rightful place in the history of pedagogy and to take up and make effective the impulses of his work which remain salient today. It is notable that both Louden and Overhoff emphasize Basedow’s important connection to and influence upon Kant. Kant praises Basedow and the Philanthropinum in his ‘Essays concerning the Philanthropinum [*Aufsätze, das Philanthropin betreffend*]’ (1776–7) in unambiguous terms (cf. AA, 2: 445–51), and according to Louden a good knowledge of Basedow is essential for the understanding of Kant’s pedagogical writings. In addition to Kant, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who wrote about Basedow much later in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1813) – though not without critical undertones – was also one of his admirers, and in the twentieth century thinkers such as Michel Foucault even turned to him.

For a sketch of Basedow’s life, we can turn to Overhoff’s easy-to-read and attractively designed biography, published in the Hamburgische Lebensbilder series, which also draws on new archival research in Denmark, among other places. Born in 1724, Basedow was the gifted son of a wigmaker and bleacher in Hamburg. After attending the Hamburg Johanneum, and after a near-disastrous stint on a merchant ship in Amsterdam, he attended the Hamburg Academic Gymnasium from 1743, where

Hermann Samuel Reimarus also taught. It was Reimarus who drew his student's attention to pedagogy through exposing him to John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.

From 1746, Basedow studied theology in Leipzig. In 1749 he accepted a position as a tutor on the Holstein estate of Borghorst, where he taught the young nobleman Josias von Qualen until 1752. In his Latin Master's thesis of 1752, Basedow explained the method he had developed in Borghorst and his success in educating the later Privy Councillor and monastery provost. He also made this known in a separate text in the German language, which he published at the same time (Basedow 1752). The fact that it appeared a full ten years before Jean-Jacques Rousseau's – unquestionably more radical – *Emile* of 1762, among other considerations, leads Loudon to wonder whether Basedow is accurately characterized (as he long has been) as the 'German Rousseau'.

In 1753, Basedow entered Danish service and accepted a position at the Sorø Knights' Academy on the Danish island of Zealand in the Baltic Sea. Here he taught moral philosophy and soon thereafter also theology. Again, he was very productive, writing for example the *Practische Philosophie für alle Stände* (1758), which received the highest praise from Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (Overhoff, p. 90) and made Basedow famous. However, Basedow's activities also provoked sharp criticism from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the orthodox theologians of Sorø. This led him to return to the region of his youth and, from 1761, to live in the city of Altona near Hamburg, teaching as a professor of the Altonaisches Gymnasium. After several years, Basedow was able to win Prince Leopold Friedrich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau (1740–1817) over to his plans of establishing a new educational institution and he received a call to Dessau. Though the opening of the Philanthropinum was delayed, its construction became part of the reconstruction of the principality after the Seven Years War.

With his main pedagogical works such as the *Methodenbuch* and the *Elementarbuch* (both originally published in 1770), the monumental *Elementarwerk* illustrated by Daniel Chodowiecki (started in 1769 and published in 1774), and with the founding of the Philanthropinum in Dessau, the passionate educator Basedow produced important milestones for the application of Enlightened thinking to education. The Philanthropinum existed until 1793, though Basedow resigned from his directorship in 1778 after various quarrels, and left Dessau in 1780. In his last years, which he spent in Magdeburg, he endeavoured to educate girls. He died in 1790.

Basedow's works contained criticism of current educational practice. This was directed not only at the teachers – whom he accused of emphasizing dull cramming and offering lessons lacking practical relevance – but also at parents, who were accordingly addressed in the title of his writings, and at the political leaders of his time. As an educator, he sought to build on the innate curiosity of children and was convinced that they can learn almost indefinitely. To achieve this, he made use of diagrams and playful elements. Vocational training was also important to him and, above all, the transcending of all class and religious boundaries. Even if the Dessau location could not be maintained permanently, Basedow's pedagogy had a long-term impact on teacher training. The Philanthropinum attracted young educators and developed their own confidence and effectiveness: one example is the *Salzmannsche Anstalten* (Salzmann Institutions) in Schnepfenthal (Thuringia).

As it turns out, the pedagogue's thinking was also political: Jürgen Overhoff establishes a link to America and explains that Basedow was fascinated by American democracy throughout his life. As he also explains (in Overhoff, chapter 8), there was plenty of criticism in the nineteenth century of Basedow and of the Enlightenment model of education more generally, particularly insofar as it laid too much emphasis on cosmopolitanism and humanism. While the liberal Basedow had intended to produce cosmopolitans, according to his later critics this only served to stunt the development of a national consciousness. Exemplary of this is a critique by Fichte, cited at the start of Overhoff (p. 7). Nevertheless, Basedow continues to be rediscovered as an educational theorist, most recently in the 1960s.

Basedow's legacy is also discussed in Loudon's book, as he indicates his intention to deal with the emergence, and reform, of modern pedagogy, which he describes as a fruit of the German Enlightenment. Along these lines, he emphasises that in its ambitions, his study is not philosophical, but more of an intellectual history. Loudon starts his study with the high-profile presentation of the philanthropist in 1776, which marked the high point of interest in Basedow and the completion of his pedagogical work. The chapter is appropriately titled: 'A New School for a New Age'. The extensive quotations from Basedow's writings, translated into English, enable the reader to become familiar with views of, and about, the educator. Loudon also deals with the question of religion in depth (chapter 6), and has chapters devoted to both the *Methodenbuch* (Basedow 1770) (chapter 7) and the great *Elementarwerk* (Basedow 1774) (chapter 8).

Both authors deserve praise for their complementary studies, each of which is usefully rounded out by a bibliography and an index. Basedow should be better known in the English-speaking world as, for example, a reform-minded figure in the model of Comenius and John Dewey. It is to be hoped that the appearance of these two studies will spur further interest in Basedow's texts themselves, and yield English translations of Basedow's central works. Particularly important here would be the *Vorstellung an Menschenfreunde und vermögende Männer über Schulen und Studien und ihren Einfluß in die öffentliche Wohlfahrt* (*Presentation for Philanthropists and Men of Means concerning Schools and Studies and their Influence on Public Welfare*) of 1768, or even the *Methodenbuch* itself.

Andrea Thiele

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

Email: [andrea.thiele@izea.uni-halle.de](mailto:andrea.thiele@izea.uni-halle.de)

## References

- Basedow, Johann Bernhard (1752) *Kurze Nachricht, in wie ferne die Lehrart des Privat-Unterrichts, welche in meiner Disputation unter dem Titel Inusitata eademque optima honestioris inventutis erudiendae methodus, vorgeschlagen worden, wirklich ausgeübet sey, und was sie gewirket habe*. Hamburg.
- (1768) *Vorstellung an Menschenfreunde und vermögende Männer über Schulen und Studien und ihren Einfluß in die öffentliche Wohlfahrt*. Hamburg
- (1770) *Das Methodenbuch für Väter und Mütter der Familien und Völker*. Altona and Bremen.
- (1774) *Des Elementarwerks erster, zweiter, dritter, vierter Band*. Dessau and Leipzig.