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Conrad Gesner

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Alternate title: Konrad Gesner

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Conrad Gesner, Conrad also spelled **Konrad** (born March 26, 1516, Zürich, Swiss Confederation [Switzerland]—died December 13, 1565, Zürich), Swiss physician and naturalist, best known for his systematic compilations of information on animals and plants.

Education and career

Noting his learning ability at an early age, his father, an impecunious furrier, placed him for schooling in the household of a great-uncle, who augmented his income by growing and collecting medicinal herbs. There young Conrad acquired a basic knowledge of plants and their medicinal uses that led to a lifelong interest in natural history.

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At school Gesner's aptitude, especially for reading the classic works of Latin and Greek authors, so impressed his teachers that a number of them sponsored his continued education. One acted as his foster father after his own father had been killed in 1531 during one of the many religious conflicts of the times; another fed and sheltered him for three years; and a third saw him through upper school at Strassburg. Together they promoted a scholarship for him to study at Bourges and Paris. Even when Gesner committed what his sponsors considered the fatal mistake at the age of 19 of marrying a young lady who had no dowry, his sponsors did not forsake him but rather found a teaching position for him in Zürich and then managed to persuade the authorities to grant him a leave of absence with pay so that he could undertake formal study of **medicine** in the city of **Basel**.

The first fruits of such faith was a Greek–Latin dictionary Gesner published in 1537, having prepared it in his spare time at Basel. At the age of 21, he was appointed professor of Greek at the **Lausanne** Academy. Three years of teaching brought him enough money for another year of studying medicine, and in 1541 he received his doctoral degree. Gesner spent the rest of his life practicing medicine in Zürich, serving also as a lecturer in Aristotelian physics at the Collegium Carolinum and, after 1554, as city physician.

During these years in Zürich, he continued to read prodigiously. At the same time, despite his many professional duties and recurring illnesses, he made field trips, started a museum, organized medical instruction, and published the 70 or so books that he had either written or edited.

Publications

In an early work, a medical tract on the virtues of milk, *Libellus de lacte et operibus lactariis*

(1542), he described the forests of the Jura as one of the greatest of his scaling of Mt. Pilatus.

one of the first records of **mountain climbing**.

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In 1545 Gesner published his *Bibliotheca universalis*, the first **bibliography** of its kind, listing about 1,800 authors alphabetically with the titles of their works, annotations, evaluations, and comments on the nature and merit of each entry. This monumental reference was followed in 1548 by the encyclopaedic work *Pandectarum sive Partitionum universalium Conradi Gesneri... libri xxi*, in which Gesner attempted to survey the recorded knowledge of the world under 21 headings. The first 19 books were published in 1548; the last, devoted to theological thought, was published in 1549, while the 20th, on medicine, was never completed.

Gesner’s next monumental achievement was a compendium of recorded knowledge concerning **animal** life, the *Historiae animalium*, in which he sought to distinguish observed facts from myths and popular errors. The first volume (1551), a generously illustrated work of 1,100 folio pages, was concerned with viviparous quadrupeds (four-footed animals that bear living young). Later volumes devoted to oviparous quadrupeds (those that hatch the young from eggs), birds, and fishes and other aquatic animals followed in 1554, 1555, and 1556; the partially completed fifth volume, on serpents, was published posthumously in 1587.

Gesner never completed a similarly comprehensive survey of **plant** life, but his notes and about 1,500 wood engravings of plants and their important flowers and seeds were used by other authors for two centuries after his death. Although in his own lifetime, he was best known for his botanical works, Gesner also published *Mithridates: de differentis linguis* (1555), an account of about 130 then-known languages, and an edition (1556) of the works of the 3rd-century Roman miscellaneous writer Claudius **Aelian**.

Assessment

By the standards of his time Gesner as a scientist showed good judgment and industry. His use of woodcuts was significant in fixing the accuracy of his data and made possible the eventual emergence of a scientific **zoology** and **botany**. His writings about his **mountain** excursions further helped to emphasize the importance of the empirical study of nature.

George A. Pettitt

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