IN MEMORIAM: Rainer Schöwerling (1937-2014).

It is with great sadness that I have to report the passing away of Rainer Schöwerling, Professor Emeritus at the University of Paderborn, on 21 January 2014.¹ Rainer Schöwerling was born in Hanover in 1937 and studied English and German at the universities of Göttingen and Marburg. He received his Ph.D. in 1967 and, soon after, became assistant professor of English at the University of Regensburg working under Karl-Heinz Göller. After his Habilitation in 1975, he was appointed Professor of English Literature at the University of Paderborn in 1978.


In terms of service to the scholarly community Schöwerling combined his interest in the Romantic period with his dedication to the German Society for English Romanticism (the former German Byron Society) between 1982 and 1986, when he took over the Presidency of this newly founded association from Hermann Fischer of Mannheim University. Between 1985 and 1994 he also served on the board of directors of the International Byron Society.

The rediscovery of the Corvey Library was, without a doubt, the decisive event in Schöwerling’s career. This sensational find was all the more astonishing, as the library (housed in the Duke of Ratibor’s Castle Corvey near Höxter on the river Weser) had virtually escaped the attention of scholars. In view of the library’s considerable holdings of English-language titles it was only natural that Schöwerling the ‘Anglicist’ and expert on English Romanticism became the initiator of the Corvey Project based at the University of Paderborn. Indeed, it must have appeared to him as a classic case of serendipity to discover that the Corvey Library, with its 73,000 volumes over all, holds some 2,600 novels in English dating from what could loosely be described as the Romantic era. In relative terms, this means that – with regard to certain peak years – more than 90% of the total fiction output from the British Isles is still extant in this private library hidden away in the easternmost parts of Westphalia. Apart from sharing in the analytical work (e.g. cataloguing and describing the collection), Schöwerling took on the responsibility to make available to the public large sections of the Corvey Library as Edition Corvey microfiches (Stuttgart: Belser WD, 1989–1990). This edition, comprising belles lettres (i.e. fiction) in German, English, and French, was followed by another one concentrating on non-fiction, i.e. travelogues, memoirs, biographies, history, theology, and reproducing some 10,000 volumes: Fürstliche Bibliothek Corvey: Microfiche-Volltext-Edition der Sachliteratur (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000). As a consequence, the Paderborn Corvey Project spawned similar enterprises in Great Britain and the US, such as, for example, The Sheffield Hallam Corvey Project (Sheffield), Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text (Cardiff), and The Corvey Novels Project (University of Nebraska, Lincoln). The Corvey Project also turned out to be a mirror of technological progress and possibilities, with microfiches as a cumbersome reproduction technology (but considered state of the art still in the late 1980s) giving way to digitisation and online accessibility, as for example, in the case of the Nineteenth Century Collections Online: European Literature, 1790-1840: The Corvey Collection (Gale) or the Corvey Digital Collection (Belser).

From an international perspective, the most sustainable result of Schöwerling’s Paderborn Corvey Project is undoubtedly the monumental historical bibliography which he co-complied and co-edited with Peter Garside and James Raven and which would not have been possible without the discovery of the collection of novels at Corvey: The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, 2 vols. (Oxford: OUP, 2000), is an inventory of the total output of novels for the period (i.e. the Corvey period and
the Romantic era). It clearly revises and supersedes the reputable work of such authorities as Andrew Block, Montague Summers, Michael Sadleir, and Dorothy Blakey.

Finally, it should be mentioned that Schöwerling’s forays into the fields of library history and the history of the book towards the end of his career did go well beyond Corvey. Schöwerling also initiated the reorganisation and restoration of the libraries of a Westphalian noble family (the Barons of Haxthausen), of a Lusatian anglophile, travel-writer, landscape gardener and general eccentric (Prince Pückler-Muskau), and of a notorious Prussian chancellor (Prince of Hardenberg). These efforts may appear less conspicuous and less well documented, as they have yet to reach the level of public notice held by Corvey.

All the high points of his career attest to Rainer Schöwerling’s tenacious interest in, and devotion to, the study of the history of the book as cultural and political history. Sometimes it appeared to those working closely with him on various projects as if the diplomatic skills, the scholarship, the contagious enthusiasm, and the generosity of the book collectors whose motives he had been determined to investigate reflected back on him across the ages. He would have been pleased and proud to see the German Anglistentag return to his ‘royal’ Hanover in 2014.

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