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Review of Jürgen Overhoff, *Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790):
Aufklärer, Pädagoge, Menschenfreund. Eine Biografie* / Robert B. Loudon,
*Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education:
Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment*

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JÜRGEN OVERHOFF, *Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790): Aufklärer, Pädagoge, Menschenfreund. Eine Biografie*, Hamburgische Lebensbilder, 25 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020), 200 pp. ISBN 978 3 835 33619 3. €16.00

ROBERT B. LOUDEN, *Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education: Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 240 pp. ISBN 978 1 350 16366 9. £76.50

The year 2020 saw the publication of two monographs about the life and work of one of the most important and influential pedagogues and educational writers of the Enlightenment, Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–90). The studies by Jürgen Overhoff and Robert E. Louden deal competently with Basedow's biography and fill gaps in our knowledge of his oeuvre. Overhoff presents the first biography in German for almost a hundred years, while Louden's work is the first ever English monograph and the product of thirty years studying the educational career and writings of Basedow, who came to Louden's attention when he began translating Kant's *Essays Regarding the Philanthropinum* (Louden, p. 2). Hence the book has a noticeable focus on Kant, providing an interesting perspective that excellently complements Overhoff's study. Not only is Louden's the first English monograph on Basedow, but none of his books have been translated into English (Louden, p. 1). As Overhoff emphasizes, Basedow – a native of Hamburg – was strongly influenced by British educational writers and philosophers, which gives particular value to Louden's work. John Locke in particular was central (Overhoff, pp. 62–6; Louden pp. 58–9). Locke's modern vision of joyful learning ('fröhlicher Unterricht', Overhoff, p. 63; Louden p. 58) left a lasting impression on the young Basedow, and his educational pamphlet *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693; translated as *Herrn Johann Lockes Unterricht von der Erziehung der Kinder*, 1708) was especially important reading for him. Later on, as headmaster of the Philanthropinum in Dessau, Basedow enthusiastically followed the adoption of the US Declaration of Independence, which he praised as exemplary in his magnum opus *Elementarwerk* (Overhoff, p. 135). Overhoff's carefully researched study, which is based on well selected source material, presents on

its final pages an American hymn book compiled by Basedow towards the end of his life. It was put together at the request of German Americans from Philadelphia, who maintained a frequent correspondence with Basedow. *Einer Philadelphischen Gesellschaft Gesangbuch für Christen und philosophische Christengenossen* was published in 1784. With this work, Basedow aimed, like many of his contemporaries, to encourage American non-denominational Christians to disassociate themselves from the clergy which was still dominant in Europe (Overhoff, p. 141).

But this is only one of the many topics discussed by Overhoff. Over the course of almost 200 pages he presents an entertaining and well informed profile of the man, the pedagogue, the philosopher, and the scholar Basedow, situating him amid the developments, debates, and discourses of his time—both pedagogical and otherwise—and elaborating on his actually quite modern way of thinking. Overhoff is not just an expert on the eighteenth century, but also a brilliant narrator. His writing is colourful, knowledgeable, and exciting. With its combination of in-depth background knowledge and unobtrusively deployed anecdotes, it is hard to put this book down and not read it in one go. One wonderful and illustrative anecdote describes how, during a cure in Bad Ems where he met Goethe and Lavater, the 50-year-old Basedow decided to learn to swim—initially with the help of an English cork jacket, though he was soon able to dispense with it (Overhoff, p. 22). This shows Basedow's life-long curiosity and eagerness to learn, which saved him from despair after disappointments and setbacks. There were quite a few of these in Basedow's life, which was lived in many locations. As a mobile scholar and intellectual, he appears quite modern. After a childhood in Hamburg shaped by the unhappy marriage of his parents (Louden, p. 33) and schooldays spent at the Johanneum, the city's Latin school, the gifted and ambitious Basedow studied theology and philosophy at the renowned Leipzig University. With its trade fair, Leipzig was known as the marketplace of Europe. In this city on the Pleiße river he made the acquaintance of Christian Fürchtegott Gellert und Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, two of the leading literary figures in German cultural life, and attended Christian August Crusius's lectures on logic and epistemology. Both Overhoff and Louden describe these acquaintances and experiences

as formative for Basedow's intellectual outlook (Overhoff, pp. 48–50; Loudon, pp. 45–53).

Theology, ethics, and pedagogy formed the basis of Basedow's non-denominational views on religious tolerance and philanthropy (Overhoff, pp. 43–58; Loudon pp. 46–52). As Loudon aptly writes, 'Basedow's future path begins to look clearer: he wants to become a teacher, but a teacher who also uses "the best possible knowledge of the sciences belonging to morals and theology"' (Loudon, p. 52). Basedow soon had the opportunity to explore this approach in practice as private tutor to Josias von Qualen in Borghorst near Kiel. Overhoff and Loudon show that 'Basedow's experience as a private tutor at the von Qualen family home was extremely enjoyable as well as fruitful' (Loudon, p. 53), and that at this time 'Basedow's pedagogy involves an ingenious mix of writing and foreign-language skill development with practical life skills training' (Loudon, p. 59). Both authors also impressively outline how this fresh and modern approach fitted in with novel educational concepts of the period, such as the reforms initiated by Frederick V of Denmark, a patron of the arts and the sciences. Among the scholars and writers supported by the king was the poet Klopstock, who was in regular contact with Basedow after the latter's appointment as professor at the Sorø Academy. Here, Basedow refined his advocacy for religious tolerance and modernized school education, which led to his first major publication *Practische Philosophie* (1758). Many further writings followed from the pen of this extraordinarily industrious author. Loudon analyses Basedow's publications in great detail, often referring to Overhoff's earlier studies. Accordingly, two chapters in Loudon's monograph are named after the two most influential books by Basedow: *Methodenbuch* (1770) and *Elementarwerk* (1774). The former text was the basis for the latter, in which Basedow expressed his thoughts with a combination of text and images. The work consists of one volume with ninety-six illustrations by the famous engraver Daniel Chodowiecki and two extensive volumes of commentaries. Topics discussed include basic questions of education and chapters on the human being, logic, religion and ethics, professions and social classes, human history, and natural history.

Loudon aims to give a voice to Basedow as an 'original and independent thinker' (Loudon, p. 2) and succeeds in this, quoting many

times from Basedow's notes and treatises. The main achievement of Loudén's book is to translate the sources, making Basedow's views accessible to an English-speaking readership. This adds an essential chapter to the history of Anglo-American pedagogy, in which Basedow has hitherto barely featured.

Reading the two books, an image emerges of a fascinating personality whose ideas anticipate modernity. One also realizes why Basedow got into more and more trouble during his career—first in Sorø and also later in Altona, where he taught at the Gymnasium Christianeum. There he was exposed to accusations and attacks by the Lutheran orthodox clergy in the wake of a review by Lessing in the *Literaturbriefe*. Lessing had revealed that Basedow's educational method was not compatible with orthodox Lutheranism, with disastrous consequences for Basedow, who subsequently left Altona (Overhoff, pp. 92–109; Loudén, pp. 79–94).

Basedow found respite when he was offered a position in the principality of Anhalt-Dessau, where he founded the Philanthropinum, a model school of the Enlightenment. Both authors discuss this phase in detail, drawing the reader's attention once more to the original and innovative approach of Basedow's pedagogy. After leaving Dessau, Basedow settled in Magdeburg as a teacher at a school for young girls. During this last decade of his life he remained a prolific author, writing a further twenty-two books (Loudén, pp. 167–74).

However, Basedow was not an uncontroversial figure in Enlightenment circles, and this aspect of his career could have been given more emphasis in both monographs. Cases in point include his dispute over miracles with Lavater, or remarks by Johann Georg Sulzer—like Basedow a teacher, practical reformer, and author of educational treatises—who called Basedow a 'charlatan' in letters to Johann Jakob Bodmer. It would also be interesting to see how colleagues and protégés of Basedow like Karl Friedrich Bahrdt continued his ideas in their own projects, albeit not always successfully. But these are follow-up discussions for which both books provide a very good basis.

Overhoff's and Loudén's studies are well illustrated and each feature Basedow's grave in Magdeburg as the last figure. The gravestone was reconstructed in 2015 and has been accessible to the public ever since (Overhoff, pp. 156–7; Loudén, p. 176). As is evident from both

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books, Basedow's work merits a permanent place in current debates on education. Both titles are strongly recommended. They are not just a pleasure to read, but undoubtedly offer plenty of inspiration for future research.

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