Albrecht von Haller Biography

Albrecht von Haller

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Biography

Albrecht von Haller was one of the great heroic figures of early biology. Born in Bern, Switzerland, he was not a healthy child, but he displayed prodigious intellectual talents at an early age. He wrote scholarly articles at the age of eight and by the age of ten, he had completed a Greek dictionary.

Haller enrolled as a medical student at the University of Leyden and earned his degree at the age of 19. At Leyden, he studied under the famous Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738). Haller began his own medical practice in 1729 at the age of 21 and continued in private practice until 1736. He was then appointed Professor of Anatomy, Botany, and Medicine at the newly created University of Göttingen. He served at Göttingen until 1753, when he returned to Bern. He spent the remaining twenty years of his life in research, writing, and government service until he died in Bern on December 17, 1777.

Haller displayed interests and talents in a wide range of fields, but he is probably best known for his work on nerve s and muscles. When he began his research, little was known about the structure and function of nerves or about their interaction with muscles. A popular theory of the time held that nerves are hollow tubes through which a spirit or fluid flows. Haller rejected this idea, however, since no one had ever been able to locate or identify such a spirit or fluid.

Instead, Haller concentrated on two specific and identifiable nerve-related phenomena, irritability and sensibility. By irritability he meant the contraction of a muscle that occurs when a stimulus is applied to the muscle. Haller found that irritability increases when the stimulus is applied to the nerve connected to a muscle. He concluded that the stimulus was transmitted from the nerve to the muscle, thus clarifying for the first time the relationship of nerve to muscle.

In his study of sensibility, Haller found that ordinary tissue does not respond to stimuli, but that nerves do. He showed that stimuli applied to nerve endings travel through the body, into the spinal column, and eventually into the brain. By removing certain parts of the brain, he was then able to show how each part affects specific muscular actions.

Because of his pioneering research on the nervous system, Haller is often credited as the founder of the science of neurology.