
Curriculum Vitae Professor Dr Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Esenbeck

Name: Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Esenbeck
Lived: 14 February 1776 - 16 March 1858

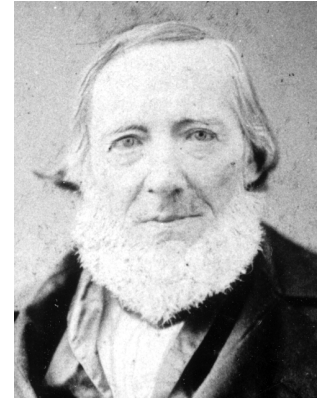


Image: Archive | Leopoldina

Christian Nees von Esenbeck was a German physician, botanist, embryologist, natural scientist, natural philosopher, writer, politician, and member of parliament. He was the XI. President of the Leopoldina. Several plants, mosses and fungi are named after him, including *Neesenbeckia* Levyns from the Cyperaceae family and *Myconeesia* Kirschst. from the Ascomycota division of fungi.

Academic and Professional Career

Nees von Esenbeck studied medicine in Jena from 1795 to 1799. He obtained his doctorate at the University of Giessen in 1800 and went on to work as a practising physician. In 1803, he started life as an independent scholar at his estate in Sickershausen near Kitzingen, where he wrote reviews for the "Jenaische Allgemeine Literaturzeitung" (Jena General Literature Journal) and conducted in-depth research in the fields of entomology and botany. He turned down a professorship at the University of Jena. In 1815, he co-founded the "Gesellschaft correspondirender Botaniker" (society of corresponding botanists) originally initiated by Christian Friedrich Hornschuch and became its director.

He taught at the University of Erlangen during the summer semester of 1817 and was also elected President of the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in the same year. 1817 was also the year in which he accepted a position as Professor of Natural History and Botany at the newly-created University of Bonn. When he was appointed to the university on the banks of the Rhine, the Academy's library and collections were relocated to Prussia. Nees von Esenbeck set up the botany department in Bonn, transforming the castle's baroque garden into a botanical garden for research purposes. The planning phase for the new garden began in the winter semester of 1818/1819. The groundwork started in January 1819 and 6,131 seed samples representing around 3,000 species were sown altogether that year.

During his scientific career, Nees von Esenbeck described some 7,000 species of flora and 2,000 species of fauna.

Between 1825 and 1829, he was the director of the training seminar for natural sciences, where teachers were trained to teach natural sciences at grammar schools and secondary schools. During this time, he worked closely with other researchers, including German natural scientist and botanist Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius. Together, they described various families of plants for the book "Flora Brasiliensis". He also collaborated with Scottish botanist Robert Brown whose work he translated and published.

He transferred to the University of Breslau (today: Wrocław) in 1830, where his specialisations included European liverworts, and he continued with his work to systematise grasses. He also wrote monographs about Lauraceae, South African Asteraceae and Brazilian liverworts.

Between 1842 and 1844, he focused his attention on the natural philosophical study of botany with Matthias Jakob Schleiden, a botanist based at the University of Jena.

In the 1840s, Nees von Esenbeck turned to Catholicism and developed an interest in politics. By 1848, he had been elected as a representative of the far left in the Berlin National Assembly. After it was disbanded, he was made to leave Berlin and attempted to run his campaign for the election in February 1849 from Bernau.

In 1848, he became the president of the first German workers' congress, the constituent assembly of the brotherhood of workers, an umbrella organisation for all workers' associations in Germany. He was involved with the Breslau (today: Wrocław) workers' association too. 1848 also saw him give a speech to the National Assembly at St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt, during which he spoke out against the oppression of the Silesian weavers. He was suspended from his university positions in 1851 as a direct result of his socio-political activities. This was followed up with disciplinary action in 1852 and he was ultimately dismissed without the privilege of pension payments. To make enough money to survive, he sold some of his herbarium and his private library between 1851 and 1854.

President of the Leopoldina

Following the death of the X. President of the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, Friedrich von Wendt (1738 to 1818), Nees von Esenbeck was elected as his successor with a narrow majority on 8 August 1818. He headed up the scholarly association as President for 40 years. He relied on financial and moral support from the Prussian Ministry of Ecclesiastical, Educational and Medical Affairs during this time.

Nees von Esenbeck, who chose the byname (cognomen) Aristoteles III, taking over as President marked the start of a new chapter in the Academy's history. He had 13 associates by his side, including highly respected scholars like physicians Johann Christian Stark and Dietrich Georg Kieser in Jena, Ignaz Döllinger in Würzburg, and natural scientists August Goldfuss in Bonn and Lorenz Oken in Jena.

Nees von Esenbeck is considered to have been one of the most active presidents, with the Leopoldina having raised its profile and achieved scientific greatness under his leadership between 1818 and 1858. “Nova Acta Leopoldina”, the journal that he published and reformed, is proof of that. The journal started publishing in German and illustrations and etchings added to the visual effect.

With the publication run increased, the Leopoldina Library was able to make arrangements for swaps with other scholars and academies – up to around 50 during Nees von Esenbeck’s tenure.

He also managed to increase membership numbers. The number of new additions had only been averaging at around seven previously but this figure rose to 54 in his first year as President. Many of the new members were on the younger side, which paved the way for the Academy to be modernised. By 1858, Nees von Esenbeck had increased the total number of members by nearly 800, many of whom were leading European natural scientists. One of his last achievements as President was adding evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin to the member list.

With the correspondence between Nees von Esenbeck and the first Prussian Education Minister Karl Sigmund Freiherr von Altenstein having been preserved, there is an official record of the issues Nees von Esenbeck dealt with as President. These included the presidential election appeal, the transfer of the Academy and its collections to Prussia and the plans to reposition the scholarly association as a “modern practical scientific academy”.

When Nees von Esenbeck was dismissed from his university positions in 1852 as a result of his political actions, he received financial support from the “Verein von deutschen Mitgliedern der Kaiserlich Leopoldinisch-Carolinischen Akademie der Naturforscher zur Unterstützung des Präsidenten Nees von Esenbeck” (Association of German Members of the Imperial Leopoldina Carolina Academy of Natural Scientists in Support of President Nees von Esenbeck) on a yearly basis. Despite the efforts of some of his associates to have him removed from the post, he remained President until his death in 1858.

Honours and Memberships

Nees von Esenbeck received a number of honours in recognition of his scientific achievements. He became a member of the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in 1816. The Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities named him a Foreign Member in the Class for Mathematics and the Natural Sciences in 1835. From 1827 onwards, he was also a Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

About Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Esenbeck

Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees was born on 14 February 1776 at Reichenberg Castle in Odenwald – the first son of estate manager Johann Conrad Nees and his wife Katharina Friederika Dorothea Esen-

beck. He had a younger brother, Theodor Friedrich Ludwig Nees von Esenbeck, who went on to become a botanist too. In his early years, he was home schooled by a legal scholar, but he went to grammar school in Darmstadt from 1792.

He married Wilhelmine Luise Katharina von Dithfurth in Sickershausen on 19 August 1802. Following the death of his wife just one year later, he added his mother's maiden name to his surname and became known as Nees von Esenbeck from 1804 onwards. He married his second wife, Elisabetha Jakobina von Mettingh, on 5 March 1804. The couple had three daughters and two sons. After their divorce in 1830, Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Esenbeck moved to Breslau (today: Wrocław) with Marie Hüllmann, the wife of his Bonn-based colleague Dietrich Hüllmann. The couple were married in 1833. Nees von Esenbeck separated from his third wife after six years without getting a divorce. He lived out his days with his cook Christiane Kambach, with whom he had one son and three daughters.

Christian Nees von Esenbeck died in Breslau (today: Wrocław) on 16 March 1858.

The Nees Institute for Biodiversity of Plants at the University of Bonn is named after him – as is a road in the German town of Erbach im Odenwald.