

When it all began – Johann Wilhelm MEIGEN and the birth of dipterology (to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of MEIGEN)

[Wie alles begann – Johann Wilhelm MEIGEN und die Geburtsstunde der Dipterologie
(zum 250. Jubiläum von MEIGENS Geburt)]

by

Adrian C. PONT

Oxford (United Kingdom)

Abstract

To mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Johann Wilhelm MEIGEN (1764–1845), a brief account is given of his life and of his achievements in dipterology.

Key words

MEIGEN, biography, history, dipterology

Zusammenfassung

Anlässlich des 250sten Geburtstages von Johann Wilhelm MEIGEN (1764–1845) wird ein kurzer Abriss seines Lebens und seiner Verdienste um die Dipterologie gegeben.

Stichwörter

MEIGEN, Biographie, Geschichte, Dipterologie

This is the slightly modified text of a pre-banquet address given at the 8th International Congress of Dipterology on 13 August 2014 in Potsdam, Germany.

Johann Wilhelm MEIGEN (Figs 1, 2) was born on 3 May 1764 and died on 11 July 1845, and so in this year of 2014 we are commemorating the 250th anniversary of his birth. But dipterology is a developing and fast-moving science, so why should we be interested in someone born so long ago? For taxonomists the name of MEIGEN is universally known as the author of some 4500 names of genera and species described in his monumental work ‘Systematische Beschreibung der europäischen zweiflügeligen Insekten’ which appeared between 1818 and 1838, in seven volumes containing 2882 pages and 74 plates of drawings. For others the name of MEIGEN is the suffix following such familiar names as *Anopheles*, *Aedes*, *Drosophila melanogaster*, *Chironomus*, *Anthomyia*, *Sarcophaga*, and numerous other genera and species throughout the Diptera. So in this paper I shall give a brief outline of a fascinating life, an account of his remarkable achievements, and finally explain why he has acquired the epithet of the Founder of European Dipterology.

MEIGEN was born in the town of Solingen and spent his whole life in what is now the federal province of North Rhine-Westphalia [= Nordrhein-Westfalen] (Fig. 6). His father was an unsuccessful farmer and shop-keeper, and from a young age MEIGEN, the fifth of eight children, had to work in order to support his parents and siblings. At the age of 10 he left school and during the next few years was privately instructed in, or taught himself, a number of skills. These included French, piano, drawing, calligraphy and geography, and these years also saw the first stirrings of his interests in natural history. By the age of 15 he was already working as a private tutor in French and also as a church organist. In 1796 he moved to Stolberg (Fig. 8), just to the east of the spa-town of Aachen, where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching French although this gradually tailed off during the French military occupation between 1794 and 1814, and giving private lessons in drawing, geography, history, piano and astronomy. On 30 August 1804, aged 39, he married the 17-year-old