

HUGO FREDERIK NIERSTRASZ
1872-1937

Nierstrasz was born in Rotterdam on 30 June 1872, the son of a notary public. He attended the Gymnasium Erasmianum in Rotterdam. In 1892 he entered upon the study of medicine at the University of Utrecht, but on the advice of A.A.W. Hubrecht he soon switched to biology. In 1898 he worked at the Zoological Station in Naples, acquiring a deep knowledge of marine animals. In 1899 and 1900 he assisted in the Siboga expedition in the Dutch East Indies, and in 1902 he received his Ph.D. on the systematics of a group of mollusks collected during that expedition.

From 1900 to 1906 Nierstrasz was a biology teacher at a gymnasium in Amersfoort, and from 1904 to 1910 he taught zoology as lecturer at the University of Utrecht and at the Veterinary School in the same city. In 1910 he succeeded Hubrecht as professor of zoology, comparative anatomy, and zoogeography at the University of Utrecht. In his inaugural address on the benefits or dangers of specialization in zoology (*Is specialisatie in de zoölogische wetenschap heilzaam of gevaarlijk?* [Utrecht, 1910]) he criticized the until then unquestioned morphological tradition in zoology as propagated by his teacher Hubrecht. Although Nierstrasz remained a morphologist all his life, he made sure that experimental zoological work was introduced in the Netherlands. He stimulated the development of zoology into a science in which morphology and physiology had equal standing. For that reason he saw to the appointment of H.J. Jordan, an experimental physiologist. After Hubrecht's death, in 1915, Jordan became the first Dutch professor in comparative physiology, at the University of Utrecht.

Nierstrasz's own scientific studies were based on the collections of the Siboga expedition. His comparative anatomical work flowed from his conviction that a basic uniformity expressed itself in all life forms. This led him to criticize the simplicity he observed in the work of many students of phylogeny and the speculative nature of phylogenetic reconstructions which were based only on selected characteristics of the organisms.

Nierstrasz was a modest man who did not care for publicity. The important influence he exerted on zoology was recognized mainly by his direct colleagues and his students. Nierstrasz became a member of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1930. He died on 6 September 1937.

Primary works

Bibliography in Jordan, *In memoriam* (see below).

Secondary sources

H.J. Jordan, 'Levensbericht van H.F. Nierstrasz (30 juni 1872-6 september 1937)', *Jaarboek der Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen* (1937-1938) 195-198; P.J. van der Feen, Jr., 'In memoriam Hugo Frederik Nierstrasz', *Vakblad voor biologen* 19 (1937-1938) 1-2; H.J. Jordan, *In memoriam H.F. Nierstrasz* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1938), with a list of publications; R.P.W. Visser, 'De Utrechtse zoölogie rond 1900: van morfologie naar vergelijkende fysiologie', *TGGNWT* 7 (1984) 49-59; B. Theunissen and M.J. Donath, 'De plaats van de morfologie in de Nederlandse zoölogie, 1880-1940: een terreinverkenning', *TGGNWT* 9 (1986) 47-67.

[L.C.P.]