

GEORGE SARTON CHAIR

of the

HISTORY OF SCIENCES

1987-89

**Sarton Chair Lecture
1987-88**

LAUDATIO J. VANDEWIELE

M. Thiery

Today we gather to honor Dr. Apr. Leo Vandewiele as laureate of the 1987-88 Sarton Memorial Chair. The members of the board elected Dr. Vandewiele because of his personal contribution to the history of pharmacy and in particular because of his epoch-making comments of medieval medicopharmaceutical manuscripts.

My dear Leo, we have known each other for more than 25 years and I remember vividly how I, a quarter of a century ago, for the first time entered your "antrum". You were then set up as a chemist at de Muide. Your spacious study deeply impressed me: piles of books - old and new - and the embryo of a collection of pharmaceutical memorabilia, which through the years would become a real museum. Since then our paths have crossed regularly, first at the meetings of the South-GeWiNa, more recently at those of the Sarton Committee. I have read with relish most of what you have written. I have listened with delight to the lectures that you as reader in the History of Medicine have given at the University of Ghent, and many private talks have infected me with your enthusiasm.

By your industry you have erected a pillar that is to remain. You initiated the historiography of pharmacy in this country from scratch and have kept it alive. It was self-evident that you would be selected as laureate of the Sarton Chair sooner or later and we are grateful that you were willing to accept this honor.

It looks as if you have always been fascinated by the historical background of your profession. I was told that it was Prof. Vincent Evrard who kindled the holy fire in 1935 - you were then still a student. During your "stage" the late Mr. Supply and his research on the "Past of Chemists from Kortrijk" showed you the track. Still later, it was Prof. Leon Elaut, editor of the journal *Scientiarum Historia*, in which you have collaborated, who has kept this interest alive. Finally, I wish to mention Dr. Brans from Rotterdam with

whom you founded the Benelux Society for the History of Pharmacy, association of which you were to become the first secretary.

Stimulated by this variety of contacts you finally stood on your own feet, and in 1951 you published your first paper: "Inventory of chemist's pots on display in the 18th-Century officina of the Museum of Folklore of Ghent." Since then you have produced an unceasing flood of scientific publications: a hundred or two articles in Dutch, English, French and German and no fewer than 20 books, about an array of subjects, though mostly in connection with Medieval pharmaceutical botany.

Meanwhile you graduated at the University of Ghent as Doctor of Pharmaceutical Science, the first in our country to do so on a historical subject. The analogy with Elaut is obvious! You taught at our university in the History of Pharmacy and Medicine. You were Editor of the Belgian Pharmaceutical Journal; co-founder of and active in two scientific societies: the already mentioned Benelux Society for the History of Pharmacy and the South-GeWiNa or South Dutch Association for the History of Medicine, Mathematics and Natural Science; member of 10 other academic associations and honorary member of as many others. And here I finish in order not to shame your modesty. You blush so easily.

And yet, I feel compelled to add a thing or two. Nobody will contradict me if I tell the audience that you are the expert on Middle-Dutch medico-pharmaceutical manuscripts. That you are also the fêted speaker on this subject you will prove to the listeners today and during the following lectures. Next - and here I really stop - in May 1975 you organised in Ghent the Jubilee Congress of the Benelux Society of the History of Pharmacy of which you were the co-founder in 1950 in Rotterdam. In this congress 140 members from all over Europe participated. The festive session that took place in this Aula, you adorned with a speech "The meaning of the pursuit of the History of Pharmacy", from which I would like to quote a paragraph. You said: " No scientific discipline has such an interesting history as pharmacy because pharmacy has so many interfaces with other disciplines. Think for instance of botany, that was studied exclusively for therapeutic purposes; zoology and mineralogy, from

which medicines were drawn; chemistry, natural science, biology, medicine, toxicology, bromatology, pharmaceuticals, microbiology, etc., without forgetting the rich scale of pharmaceutical practice, that on its turn contains unspeakable sources for folklore, that the pharmacohistorian in his turn can consult to find an explanation for many practices and interpretations of old chemists and for the popular belief and the magic that stick to many a medicine". This enumeration of interfaces you concluded with a quotation of George Sarton: "The history of science is not only the history of our increasing knowledge, it is also the history of the progress of tolerance and of freedom of thought". And here we have the interface between Sarton en Vandewiele. Identical ideas and insights mentioned in the year 1975, when at this university and in this town hardly a handful of men knew who George Sarton was and what he meant for the history of science.