

SARTON CHAIR LECTURES

Laudatio Gaston DEMAREE

Erik Thoen

Gaston R. Demarée (63), who is honoured today with the Sarton Chair, is currently the most important scholar of Belgium who studies historical meteorology, historical climatology and historical hydrology, for which he got this 'historical' prize. Most of his important studies were based upon s.c. instrumental observations, which are observations made with instruments such as the thermometer, the barometer, the rain-gauge etc. These kinds of observations are available in the historical sources since the 17th century, although in Belgium we do not know yet serial observations older than the second half of the 18th century. The erection of the KMI (Royal Meteorological Institute of Belgium), was a major change in this evolution and from 1833 on Belgium got an advantage over many other countries since observations were made very accurately and based very soon on a very dense network of observation stations. Especially the mathematician Adolphe Quetelet played a major part in this evolution.

It is Dr. Demarée who gathered all these data and studied them in a very fundamental way. Therefore we can call him the 'spiritual father' of historical meteorology and historical climatology of Belgium, although, as a scholar he was also active in many other fields, as we will mention below. A few years ago, due to a joined research project between the Royal Meteorological Institute and the Ghent University, I got acquainted with Dr. Demarée as a very enthusiastic scholar.

For all the mentioned reasons, Dr. Demarée really deserves more than anyone else this prestigious Sarton chair of the Ghent University, a chair that exists since 1985 and is given yearly to a scholar who did important work in the field of the history of sciences.

Gaston René Demarée was born in 1940 at Torhout in West-Vlaanderen. After his studies at the high school Koninklijk Atheneum Roeselare, he

studied mathematics at the Free University of Brussels (VUB-Vrije Universiteit te Brussel), at that time the Dutch speaking part of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He also got a degree in physics at the ULB. Immediately after his studies, he became a lector in mathematics at the Andes University in Bogota, Colombia and he took this opportunity to discover Latin America.

Back in Belgium he became a teacher in mathematics at the Koninklijk Atheneum Koekelberg. When at the VUB, the new Department of Science and Environment was erected, he began to study water management with Professor Dr. Ir. André Van der Beken. This paved his way to the Royal Meteorological Institute of Belgium (KMI-IMR) where he first became attaché en later assistant of the late Professor Franz Bultot. In this period, he also became responsible for intergovernmental programmes with the World Meteorological Organization in Africa and in Latin America.

Meanwhile he had made a PhD in Sciences under the direction of Prof. Dr. Hugo Declerq at the VUB. It was an interdisciplinary study and a statistical analysis of the extreme values of precipitation in Ukkel as well as of its climatological as hydrological consequences. In 1989 he became the head of the unit of Hydrology of the Royal Meteorological Institute of Belgium. Since the reorganisation of this institution in 1998 he became the head of the research unit "Risk Analyses and Sustainable Development" at the Department " Meteorological Research and Development". Nowadays he is acting Head of the Research Department.

His research is situated in the domain of risk analysis of storm surges and river floods, surface water hydrology, the study of former instrumental meteorological observations, historical climatology (of Europe but also of China, Japan, the North Atlantic area, ...), the impact of eruptions of volcanoes on climate and so on. He wrote more than 100 papers and reports in mathematics, hydrology and historical climatology in national and international journals and proceedings.

Gaston Demarée is a member of scientific organisations such as the Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences (KAOW) and in 2003 he was also the president of this Academy.

In my own name, in the name of the Department of History of the Ghent University, I honestly want to congratulate Dr. Demarée with this most valuable distinction and I hope that in the future both our institutions can continue a most fruitful collaboration.