

## LAUDATIO Prof dr. Karel VAN CAMP

*W. Wieme*

It gives me great pleasure to welcome here today Professor Karel Van Camp, on the occasion of the presentation of the Sarton Medal awarded by the Faculty of Applied Sciences. I am particularly pleased to recognize among the audience many who have known Karel at a time when he studied physics at our University, at a time when we had the pleasure of having many students from Antwerp among us. Some of you have been his colleagues when he was assistant professor at the former Verschaffelt Laboratory, in those dark ages when the first linear accelerator was being constructed in the basement of this very building. The fact that this accelerator already belongs to history — and maybe some day Karel will give us a lecture about the heroic times of its construction — illustrates all too clearly the explosive developments in physics during the last decades.

However, Karel's interests were not confined to accelerator physics. In 1966 he was one of the pioneers of the newly founded Antwerp University, the RUCA, where he was responsible for the development of a new physics laboratory for all students of science and medicine. As he moved to Antwerp, his research shifted towards biophysical problems and he became involved with problems concerning physics of the inner ear.

At the same time, the general atmosphere of his home town Antwerp has certainly stimulated his growing interest for the cultural heritage of this great historic place. He trained for the official guide certificate and as a physicist his attention focused on some long-forgotten but important collections of scientific instruments. His newly found interest benefited from the same enthusiasm with which he pursued his scientific career. He researched his subject, he asked expert advice,

he participated in international conferences about historic scientific instruments, he published original papers and organized colloquia.

Of course, his field of work was not restricted to the university. Karel Van Camp became co-founder of AWIE, The Association for the preservation of the Antwerp scientific and industrial heritage. His main personal achievement was rescuing what is presently called the Van Heurck Collection. This large collection of mainly 19th century instruments had been enthusiastically assembled by the Antwerp engineer Van Heurck in his at that time "state of the art" private laboratory, but after his death in 1909 it had been neglected and even forgotten. When Karel re-discovered the collection, he had it transferred to the RUCA, where it has been catalogued and meticulously restored. Other items ferreted-out in basements and old cupboards have constantly been added. The showpieces of the collection have been on display on several occasions. I mention, among others, the exhibit of a collection of microscopes at the Antwerp Zoo and the electrical instruments of the 19th century which have been on show for the general public in the EBES building, both in Antwerp and in Langerbrugge. These exhibits have drawn large audiences and have undoubtedly contributed to a revival of the interest in the history of scientific instruments in Belgium.

Because the bulk of the Van Heurck collection concerns applied physics, i.e., engineering instruments, and because Van Heurck himself was an engineer, the Faculty of Applied Sciences has awarded this year's Sarton Medal to Professor Van Camp. A work like the one he started is of course never finished and on presenting Karel with this medal I wish him wholeheartedly every possible success in the future.

In the world of today's engineers, attention for the history of science is not to be taken for granted. The technologically minded engineer looks at the future, his mind races forward rather than backward. It takes some courage to admit that even today's technocratic society might be able to learn something by at least taking some notice of past experiences. Perhaps today's engineers believe too eagerly in the almighty computer and they tend to forget that revolutionary ideas are

usually the final stage of a long-protracted process that can only be appreciated with the necessary hindsight. The importance of the history of science cannot be expressed any better than by citing one of the greatest of all scientists, Sir Isaac Newton, who admitted in a letter to Robert Hooke (1675) : *"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants"*.

Among the giants Newton had in mind, Galileo Galilei holds without doubt a most important place, as we all know. Galileo too, however, was standing on the shoulders of many others, most of whom are completely unknown to us. About those long-forgotten giants Professor Van Camp will talk today.

I know it will give him a particular pleasure to be able to give this lecture at his old Alma Mater, for he may be a real son of Antwerp, part of him also belongs to Gent. I am convinced we will all enjoy his talk about "Mechanics before Galileo".

Gent, February 28th 1991.