

**SARTON CHAIR LECTURES**

## LAUDATIO LAURENCE W.B. BROCKLISS

*H. De Ridder - Symoens*

It is my great pleasure as *collega proximus* to introduce Dr Laurence Brockliss as the eleventh Laureate of the Interfaculty Sarton Memorial Chair of the History of Sciences on the proposal of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters.

For George Sarton 'History of Science' was 'History of Culture'. Therefore the history of sciences has to be interwoven with that of arts, literature, politics, religion, etc.

Dr Brockliss' research and his publications can be considered a perfect realisation of Sarton's conceptions of 'History of Science'. In his work natural sciences, liberal arts and society are harmoniously integrated. The scope is European, even if the actual subject may be French or English.

Laurence William Beaumont Brockliss, born in 1950 in the County of Kent is a pure Oxbridge academic. He studied history at the University of Cambridge and graduated in 1976 with a Ph.D. on *The University of Paris in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. I read his thesis in the Library of Cambridge long before I knew the author personally.

After an intermezzo of some years as Lecturer in History at the University of Hull, he was appointed fellow of Magdalen College Oxford and Reader in Modern History at the University of Oxford. At present he is chairman of the Faculty of Modern History.

In the twenty years since his graduation Dr Brockliss has been a prolific author. I shall not attempt to enumerate all his publications. Rather I shall restrict my account to the fields our Laureate has covered in the history of science and stress the originality of his work.

Speaking in broader terms, Brockliss' fields of research are the history of academic teaching and the history of the natural sciences, with a focus on medicine. He is especially interested in their mutual dependence and interaction; and he has explored these matters in relation to particular societies.

Till the seventies the conception historians had about the European universities in the early modern period, roughly from 1500 till 1800, was one of decline and uselessness. The Scientific Revolution happened outside the universities; teaching subjects were outdated, the deontology of the professors was poor and the academic degrees were sold to students who were uninterested in science. Instead, they cherished the more social side of academic life, fencing, dancing, etiquette and conversation. University education was represented as more of an occupational therapy for the *jeunesse dorée* than a preparation for their future tasks, for which they were already destined.

The *nouvelle histoire* of the sixties and the seventies of this century with its new approach and new methods has not bypassed the history of universities and the history of the sciences. New types of questions were suggested through the influence of the social sciences and the pursuit of an integrated history. As a result the standard caricature of the role of universities in the scientific movement during the *ancien régime* has totally changed.

To this historiographical renewal and adjustment Dr Brockliss has made an important contribution with his work on the form and contents of the educational system. In his highly appreciated *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Oxford U.P. in 1987, the author analyses the subjects taught in French colleges and universities in the period of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. On the basis of previously rarely consulted student notes (*cahiers*) and professorial textbooks he reconstructs the curriculum of each of the four faculties, arts, theology, law and medicine, with the emphasis on the teaching of natural sciences. These courses are, of course, very relevant in the age of Descartes and Newton. They give information of the level to which professors integrated in their lectures

the actual scientific findings and discoveries. This research is the more relevant as it reflects the educational level of France, a country under an absolutist regime which might have made higher education rather conservative and of a low standard.

The results of his research convey a totally different impression of the previously despised and underrated French universities on the eve of the French Revolution. They demonstrate how essential the impact of higher education has been on social, political and intellectual life of the *ancien régime*. The dichotomy in university teaching between the establishment-reinforcing ethical and metaphysical sciences and the more dynamic and innovative natural sciences led to two different educational results. On the one hand, the academics developed and promoted a justification for the divine right of the French absolute monarchy, which helped to secure and defend that monarchy. On the other hand, they stimulated new scientific and philosophical ideas and transferred these to generations of students which resulted in the breakdown and final collapse of this absolute monarchy.

Notwithstanding the fact that only certain professors of medicine had an international reputation and contributed personally to the advancement of medicine, they also played an important - indeed crucial - role in the contemporary scientific movement. This aspect will be explained more fully in the book that is in press, namely *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford U.P. 1997).

In many of his articles L. Brockliss has penetrated more deeply into topics related to the Scientific Revolution in France; there he has explored in particular the place of logic, mathematics and the natural sciences in the philosophical curriculum of the University of Paris.

Besides that, he has contributed to several volumes dealing with the history of the *curriculum studiorum* and the evolution of science in England in the early modern period.

Thanks to his profound knowledge of the situation both on the Continent and in the British Isles, Dr Brockliss is the right person to

contribute to books covering the whole of Europe. In the recently published second volume of *A History of the University in Europe*, sponsored by the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents and Vice-Chancellors of the European Universities (CRE), he gives a remarkable, skilfully presented overview of the curricula of early modern universities in Europe. It is the first synthesis ever written on that theme. That chapter confirms his broad knowledge of the content of teaching and of the ways of knowledge transmission in preindustrial Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Not only as an author but also as the general editor between 1988 and 1993 of the international journal *History of Universities*, published by Oxford U.P. Dr Brockliss has justified his position at the forefront of the new approach to the history of universities that is linked to the history of sciences and committed to placing higher education in its intellectual, social, political and religious environment.

It is for all these reasons that the Sarton Committee at the proposal of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters unanimously decided to appoint Dr Brockliss to the Sarton Memorial Chair 1996-1997. Today and tomorrow we will have the opportunity to become familiar with the ideas and views of this outstanding scholar. The lecture of tomorrow on *Civility and Science: From Self-Control to Control of Nature*, about the connections between the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution will reflect the fresh and innovative concepts of our Laureate on the significance of the civilization process in the creation of new science.

And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me very great pleasure to ask my Colleague, Dr Laurence Brockliss, to give his public lecture on *Medicine and the Church in the Age of the Enlightenment*.

