SARTON CHAIR LECTURES

Laudatio Christiaan Sterken

J. Uyttenhove

Laudatio Christiaan STERKEN

Jos Uyttenhove

It is for several reasons a particular honour and pleasure to introduce today the Sarton Chair Laureate 2006-2007 Prof. Christiaan Sterken in this historical Aula of Ghent University. Christiaan Sterken is born in Bruges on December 3 1946. He studied at this University and obtained his master degree in mathematics summa cum laude in June 1969 with a thesis in the field of astronomy (promoter Prof. P. Dingens). Chris Sterken however rapidly broads his horizons to higher places - one can take this literally – and moves to the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in La Silla, Chile at an altitude of 2400 m.

From 1971 up to 1973 he was there as staff astronomer active for ESO. This meant for the young couple Lieve and Chris to move to Santiago in the Chile of President Salvador Allende.

Returned in Belgium, Chris held positions as assistant at the universities of Ghent and Brussels and obtained his PhD at the Brussels Free University (VUB) in 1976, again summa cum laude. After some temporary mandates he became research leader and afterwards research director at the National Fund for Scientific Research NFWO (now FWO-Flanders) with as home base the Astrophysical Institute of the VUB in Brussels. Since 1992 he is also visiting professor at the VUB. Meanwhile he obtained an aggregation for the HO at Liege State University (ULg) in 1988.

During all those years Chris Sterken continued his observations at the ESO-observatory in Chile; in November 2006 he will travel for (approximately) the 130th time to La Silla. He probably is European record holder in observational visits to Chile and, inevitably, a very experienced long distance traveller. A quick calculation of the accumulated distances during his plane travels to Chile results in 3, 000, 000 km or 75 times around the world: these are really astronomic numbers!

Within the framework of the international Halley's Comet Watch Chris Sterken stayed during 1986 for six months in New Zealand, with his wife Lieve and their 4 children. This way, he was able to observe Halley's Comet in optimal conditions in the Southern hemisphere. The observation of this famous comet, which returns approximately every 76 years (therefore generally only once in a lifetime) has also an important place in the history of astronomy.

Furthermore Chris Sterken has stayed and worked in many observatories around the world, from Peking to Paris, from the small hills in the German Eifel region up to the 4000 meters high Keck-telescopes on Mauna Kea, Hawaii. All this resulted in over 400 scientific papers and many contributions to international conferences. He became editor of international journals and member and President of divisions of the International Astronomical Union (IAU), namely the Commission 25 and the Division IX (optical techniques). In Belgium, he is member of the National Committee for Astronomy and many other commissions.

Considering all these facts it is evident that Chris Sterken is a prominent, very active and experienced contemporary astronomer, but for a lot of years he also has acquired a strong reputation in the field of the history of physics and of astronomy in particular.

In fact astronomy is the pre-eminently field of science where one must frequently look back to previous observational data; often one must compare recent observations with modern equipment such as CCD-sensors to older data on photographic plates. Thorough knowledge of the former observational methods and instrumentation is a requirement for the correct interpretation of historical results. How sensitive were old instruments, which resolution was possible in spectroscopic measurements, which calibration methods were used? All important questions for a researcher comparing old and recent data. Because of this one can easily understand that Chris Sterken became gradually more and more interested in the history of its research field. Everybody who knows Chris also knows that when he starts to investigate something, he gets to the bottom of it and never rests before he himself has examined everything thoroughly.

In the field of the history of sciences Chris Sterken organised in 1990's two workshops concerning the History of Photometry (1997 and 1999) and he wrote many articles in the field of the history of astronomy. He is editor and

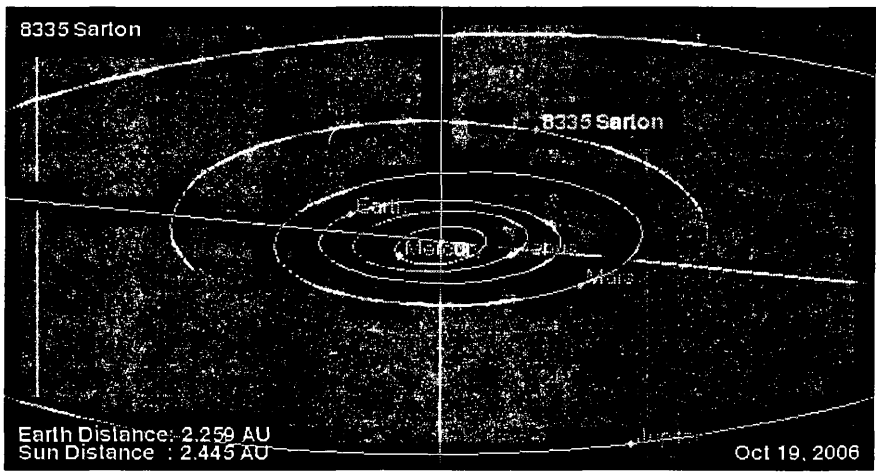
co-author of 3 books in this area (2000, 2001, 2005). At the VUB he is teaching the course "History of Physics" in the master in physics curriculum. He acted repeatedly as a visiting professor with lectures on important and actual historical subjects in the "History of Sciences" course at our UGent. In 2004 for example, he lectured with brilliance about the Venus-transits and their historical significance. In 2005, the World Year of Physics and the 100th anniversary of Einstein's wonder-year 1905, the solar eclipse expeditions of Sir A.S. Eddington (1919) for the experimental confirmation of the general relativity theory was the subject. These lessons always relied on careful research of the original documents. During his research for historical source material Chris Sterken could often use his connections in important observatories to perform investigations in their libraries and to study old original documents in the archives.

By this presentation of Sarton Chair, Chris Sterken now also receives proper recognition in Flanders, after scientific prices abroad (Poland) and from the Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux Arts de Belgique (Prix Agathon De Potter).

For the Sarton lectures, Chris Sterken has chosen a historically very important and - at that time - a controversial subject: the provability of the heliocentric theory from Römer to Foucault, concerning the earth revolution and rotation. I am convinced that the lectures of today and tomorrow will be fascinating!

Before giving the floor over to the laureate, I want to mention something interesting concerning George Sarton. During the recent meeting of the International Astronomical Union in Prague (2006), it had been decided, on proposal of Chris Sterken, to give the planetoid 8335 the name of George Sarton (Minor Planet Circular 57422) with the following motivation: "Belgian-born mathematician George Alfred Leon Sarton (1884-1956) moved to the U.S. in 1915. Founder of the magazines Isis and Osiris, author of influential books and a professor at Harvard University, he is credited with introducing the History of Science as an important field of study in the U.S." Sarton had given his name years ago already to a crater on the moon, now he has also planetoid! All data about the planetoid Sarton and its orbit can be found on NASA-JPL-website
http://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/sbdb.cgi?sstr=sarton;orb=1;cov=0#orb

Finally I am very honoured to have this opportunity to introduce my friend Chris Sterken as Sarton Chair holder in the Aula of his Alma Mater where he started his superb career!



Position of planetoid 8335 "Sarton" on October 19 2006, the day of the first 2006 Sarton lecture