

## LAUDATIO ROGER BLONDEAU

*Michel Thiery*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Blondeau or, more appropriately, to comply with a tradition, by reading the laudatio of a man whom most of you certainly know through one or several of the exciting books he has written, be it on the bibliobiography of famous Flemish scientists or on the rise of the iconoclastic "movement" in the "Westhoek" (western corner of Flanders) in the early 16th century.

The person who hides behind the bulk of printed pages is less well known, however. Unassuming, not to say shy, Blondeau is the bee (or should we put it the bumble-bee ?), laboring quietly but with the tenacity characteristic of the true West-Fleming to produce those marvels. In his beautiful house with sign-board "Ter Wijngaerde" ("In the Vineyard", no doubt chosen because he is a true "burgundian", in the Haringestraat (Haringstraat after the animal species which long ago was the richness of that part of Flanders and which during the last World War has saved the population from starvation) of Roesbrugge (between Veurne and Poperinge and close to the French border), is a haven of peace and tranquility. Here Blondeau thrones — flanked by his spouse and his sister-in-law — in the middle of a room cluttered with books and archivalia.

Roger-A. Blondeau was born in the aftermath of the Great War — on april 18, 1919 — in Beveren-aan-de-Ijzer, another historical place. Having completed his classical secondary studies with flying colors he entered the State University of Gent as a student in mathematics and physics. The outbreak of the Second World War put an end to his dream to become an astronomer. The doctorandus, who had to make a living for himself, was compelled to quit the Alma Mater and became a civil

servant. But his mathematical vein and complementary studies (mostly at night) of fiscal science were put at his advantage : he rose from the ranks and ended his professional career as honorary inspector at the Ministry of Finance. Nor did the lengthy detour prevent him from taking up the study of topics paralleling his original study direction. Indeed, in his spare time Blondeau started to explore the historical background of physics and mathematics and, above all, of astronomy. He became interested in the complex and perplexing life and deeds of Fernand Verbiest (born in Pittem in 1623), the Flemish Jesuit who for two decades dwelled in China holding the leading function of "calendarian" to K'ang-si and directing the emperor's observatory. In 1970 this fascinating story was completed and made the subject of Blondeau's first opus : *Mandarijn en astronoom, Fernand Verbiest s.j. aan het hof van de Chinese keizer* (Mandarin and astronomer. Verbiest at the court of the Chinese emperor). Blondeau's flirtation was bound to grow into a lifelong affair, and he will come back to it in two more books : *Fernand Verbiest s.j.. Als Oost en West elkaar ontmoeten* (Verbiest. When East and West meet) in 1983 and five years later *Fernand Verbiest s.j. als wetenschapsmens* (Verbiest as scientist). The latter is an in-depth analysis of Verbiest's endeavors and of the impact the missionary-astronomer and his fellow brothers had on the evolution of the natural sciences in 17th-century China.

The Verbiest episode was not an endpoint. From 1970 on Blondeau started his biobibliographical investigation of a long list of Flemish scientists, from Jacob van Maerlant to the foundation of the Academies. Many of these studies were published as articles. Later on they were reshaped to form a coherent whole : *Wetenschap in de taal der Vlamingen* (Science in the tongue of the Flemings). This book was issued this very week and I wish you to circulate a copy among this audience. There is more in the making and if my information is correct Blondeau is currently drafting a book on "our" Mercator, the geographer and cartographer who is to be officially commemorated (he died in 1594) in 1994. There seem to be two more books in the pipeline : one about Simon Stevin, the other about Jan Palfyn.

Circumstances did prevent Blondeau from pursuing his academic studies but the harvest of his "sideline" activities has been most impressive. Fortunately, his work was fully recognized. Blondeau was elected a member of the "Belgian Committee for the History of Sciences" and of the "Permanent Commission for the History of Sciences" of the Royal Academy. He was granted the prestigious Professor Gillis price for the History of Sciences in 1974.

Gent did not wish to lag behind and a year ago Blondeau was proposed by the Faculty of Applied Sciences as a candidate for the G. Sarton Memorial Medal. The members of the *ad hoc* committee applauded and confirmed the proposal. And that was it.

My dear Roger : we have known each other for many years, be it mainly telephonically and by correspondence. Whenever I needed some data or an elusive document you obliged me by delving in your fantastic archives. Today it is my privilege to convey to you the gratitude of our Alma Mater, your Faculty and the Sarton Committee. Accept my most cordial congratulations. To Mrs. Blondeau we extend our deep respects. Ad multos annos !