

LAUDATIO GERARD L'ESTRANGE TURNER

W. Wieme

Today we honor Prof. dr. Gerard L'Estrange Turner as the Laureate of the 1994-95 Sarton Memorial Chair. As our Chairman Professor Thiery just explained this Chair was created at our university to acknowledge important individual contributions to the history of sciences. I will endeavor to summarize the contributions of Professor Turner to this field.

Gerard Turner was born in 1926 and studied at the University of London where he obtained in 1949 a B.Sc. in physics and subsequently in 1959 a M.Sc. in crystallography. He started his professional career as a research physicist at the General Electric Research Laboratory. He went on to teach crystallography at Battersea College, then worked as a researcher at Philco Corporation in Philadelphia, USA. However, I suspect he always had a secret love affair with old instruments. Indeed, when in 1963 he was invited by the Curator of the Museum for the History of Science in Oxford to join their staff he did not hesitate. This unexpected twist became not only the start of a second career but a lifetime passion. His special attention went to the unrivaled collection of microscopes hidden behind the walls of this Museum. Only a few weeks ago some of our engineering students had the opportunity of glimpsing at that collection, being given a private tour by Professor Turner. They can certainly testify as to the importance of it.

The research carried out on the collection of optical instruments owned by the Museum established Gerard Turner as an authority in this field. For this research he was awarded a D.Sc. from the University of London.

Professor Turner has been studying historic instrument collections all over the world. He is especially appreciated by our Dutch neighbors and he visits them frequently. It may be worth mentioning that his first book was a catalogue of the late eighteenth-century Van Marum

collection owned by the Teyler Museum in Haarlem. It may also be worth mentioning that several of his publications have been translated into Dutch, as for example : "Antieke Wetenschappelijke Instrumenten" and "Historische Microscopen" (Moussault's Uitgeverij, Bussum, 1981).

In 1988, having spent 25 years with the Museum in Oxford, Turner was appointed Visiting Professor in the History of Scientific Instruments at Imperial College, London. This appointment allowed him to devote still more of his time to research on historic instruments and to increase his already impressive list of publications which at the last count included 10 books and more than 100 papers. Recently, his special interest turned towards the sixteenth century, e.g. to instruments made during the reign of Elizabeth I and to Renaissance astrolabes. Today he will share with us some of his findings from that Elizabethian period, and tomorrow he will give a lecture about Mercator's astrolabes. Mercator died on December 2, 1594, to the day almost exactly 400 years ago. As you know 1994 has been proclaimed "Mercator Year" in commemoration of his 400th birth anniversary, and the interest of the general public in this important scientist has been revived. Although Mercator's parents were German, he was born and educated in Flanders and he learned the craft of scientific instrument making in Flanders. He was famous as an instrument maker even before he started making the maps and globes which would establish his name. It was thought that all of Mercator's instruments had been lost. I am particularly proud to remind you that it was Professor Turner who identified a number of the astrolabes which belong to the Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza in Florence as having been manufactured in Mercator's workshop. We all look forward to hear more about this in tomorrow's lecture.

Having given a short overview of Gerard Turner's career, I shall make no further attempt at summing up his many professional achievements. Let me just add that he has been the first Chairman of the Scientific Instrument Society, President of the Royal Microscopical Society and the British Society for the History of Science, and that last year he was awarded by the trustees of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich the prestigious Caird Medal.

It takes many qualities to achieve recognition as an instrument historian : connoisseurship, technical insight, historical feeling, familiarity with instrument populations both in museums and in private hands are all necessary but do not by themselves result in great achievements. For this one needs unlimited passion. I think Gerard Turner's passion for scientific instruments has indeed brought him the worldwide recognition he deserves. When I recently telephoned him early on an Sunday morning and excused myself for disturbing him at such a moment he simply said "you don't disturb me at all, I'm always working on old instruments, it's my life".

This life is his, but he happily shares it with his charming wife Helen. She not only supports him, but actively encourages and assists him with his research.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think it is abundantly clear that Gerard Turner has indeed devoted a life's work to the history of scientific instruments. It was the proposal of the Faculty of Engineering of our university to acknowledge this with a Sarton Memorial Chair. Although in a faculty of engineering little time — too little time perhaps — can be devoted to the study of historic roots, instruments have undoubtedly always been central to scientific practice and consequently to engineering and engineering applications. I think you will agree that Professor Turner's research fits perfectly within the interests of the engineering community. On the other hand, Gerard Turner's passion and vision are in line with the vision of George Sarton as to the importance of the history of Science. Turner's investigations have been wide-ranging and his influence on other contemporary scholars in the field of the history of scientific instruments is unequalled. For all these reasons, the Sarton Committee has unanimously decided to award the Sarton Memorial Chair 1994-95 to Professor Gerard l'Estrange Turner.

It is with the greatest pleasure that I now invite my dear colleague to give his lecture about "The Instrument Makers of Elizabethan England".