

IN MEMORIAM

J.D.North: historian of the exact sciences

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John D. North with his daughter Julian and his granddaughter Gabriel

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John North, Emeritus Professor of History of philosophy and the Exact Sciences, was pre-eminent in his disciplines among his generation. From his chair at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, which he held from 1977 to 1999, he earned himself an international reputation and enviable honour for his university.

He was a man of immense learning, intellectual energy, wisdom, humour and affection. He was remarkable for his independent scholarship, wideranging interest and tirelessly detailed work. Besides his many importantly original, always informative and sometimes provocative books, his output of papers, articles and reviews was prodigious; about 270 were written between 1963 and 2007.

John David North was born in 1934, in Cheltenham. From the Grammar School at Batley he went on to Merton College, Oxford, where he began his studies by reading maths but changed to PPE. He left Oxford to teach in Derbyshire where simultaneously he studied for an external London University BSc in maths, physics and astronomy, which he gained with distinction in 1958.

He was appointed to teach physics at Magdalen College School, Oxford, by its master, R. S. Stanier, who was noted for choosing teachers whose knowledge was eclectic and who had great enthusiasm for their specialist subjects. While there North studied for his doctorate and won a Nuffield Foundation research fellowship, which he held at Oxford University in the history and philosophy of science from 1963 to 1968, after which he began his academic career as librarian and assistant curator of the university's Museum of the History of Science.

In 1977 he was appointed to the chair at Groningen where he established his worldwide reputation. Groningen's gain was Oxford's ill-judged loss. He was the best professor of the history of science that Oxford never had.

At Groningen he committed himself wholeheartedly to his new university and to the Netherlands. He learnt fluent spoken and written Dutch at a time when it was not compulsory for foreigners working in the Netherlands to do so. He rose within the institution to become a member of the University Council as Dean of the Central Interfaculty and from 1990 to 1993 as Dean of the Faculty. His voice was respected in both university and national deliberations.

Throughout his years at Groningen he maintained an extraordinary level of productivity and was in demand as visiting professor at many universities, which included Frankfurt, Yale, Aarhus, Austin and Minnesota.

So admired were his abilities and his personal charm that he was courted as a member of numerous societies. He was made FRAS in 1959 and later in 1992 a Fellow of the British Academy. He became a member of the Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences in 1967, its

administrative secretary from 1983 to 1989, and from 1990 its secrétaire perpetuel and subsequently honoraire. He was a member of the International Astronomical Union and at one time the president of its historical commission, a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and for three years he sat on its council, a foreign member of the Royal Danish Academy, and a member of the German Academia Leopoldina.

North worked relentlessly and at the same time derived unbounded pleasure from his research and writing. It earned him well-deserved distinction; in 1989 the Médaille Alexandre Koyré was awarded to him in recognition of his achievements, and in 1999 he was given one of the Netherlands' highest public honours by being made Knight, Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw.

North's books are the solid foundation of his reputation. On them all else rests. He was a person of independent mind and in many ways a private scholar; and yet he was quick to acknowledge and pay tribute to those who inspired, encouraged and admired him. First among these was his wife, Marion, whom he married in 1957. She was his intellectual whetstone and his chief collaborator in ordering the immense detail of his work. He paid her his greatest tribute by dedicating to her his last book, *Cosmos*, published in July of this year. Then there were others, scholars in many different subjects, among them A. C. Crombie and Nevill Coghill, both great admirers of his work and steadfast in their support.

After his first book, *The Measure of the Universe: A History of Modern Cosmology*, published in 1965, his next important publication was the exhaustive study of the 13th-century scientist Richard of Wallingford. An edition of his writings, with introductions, English translation and commentary was published in three volumes in 1976. He rediscovered the manuscripts of Richard's writings, astronomical, mathematical, ecclesiastical and devotional, and he added to them in particular a draft treatise on the St Albans astronomical clock, known now in some detail from a solitary Bodleian manuscript, which he first recognised in 1965. During the 1970s Richard's clock was reconstructed and shown in London in 1981; it was then bought by an American, Seth Attwood, for his collection of clocks, which has since been dispersed.

There followed *Horoscopes and History* (1986). Then, partly as a consequence of his early interest in astrolabes and the other scientific instruments that he found at Oxford's Museum of the History of Science, North published *Chaucer's Universe*. He argued that Chaucer made more

use of astronomy in the structure and allegory of his poetry than had been previously thought and he explained the elements of Chaucerian cosmology; he made it possible to have a far better understanding of Chaucer's texts than ever before. It is a book that runs to 564 pages and was described in *The Times Literary Supplement* as "one of the century's monuments of scholarship".

North wrote and revised four more books up to 1994 when he published *The Fontana History of Astronomy and Cosmology*. It was a tour de force of 697 pages of erudite, informative writing accessible to the general reader as well as the expert.

Then he devoted himself to the study of Stonehenge. He explored numerous Neolithic grave monuments and gave an exact explanation of the purpose of the Wiltshire site in his book *Stonehenge: Neolithic Man and the Cosmos*. He established that the monument had to do with astronomical observations of the setting midwinter sun, not, as had been supposed, of the rising midsummer sun.

In 2002 he caused both consternation and approbation among his critics with the publication of *The Ambassadors' Secret: Holbein and the World of the Renaissance*. From a close analysis of details of the painting, which hangs in the National Gallery, he calculated that it was intended to depict a time of 4pm on Good Friday, April 11, 1533, which was precisely 1,500 years after Christ's death.

North's productivity never ceased. In 2005, the year in which he first became aware of his illness, he published *God's Clockmaker: Richard of Wallingford and the Invention of Time*.

His magnum opus appeared in July this year. A massive, definitive volume, it was a revised edition of his history of astronomy and cosmology, called *Cosmos*. It stands as his own monument, an 800-page history of man's ideas about the cosmos from cave paintings of Palaeolithic times to present discoveries made possible by the Hubble telescope.

North's peers were unstinting in their praise for the book, one describing it as "the finest comprehensive history of astronomy and cosmology written", another calling it "awesome in its breadth and scholarship, astonishingly detailed in places, and perceptive in its wry commentary where the received wisdom makes overblown claims".

North endured his terminal cancer with humorous resignation. His concern for his family and friends was typical of his consistent humanity, considerate, modest, droll and gently ironic. He was a sceptic by nature

who believed in minute examination of evidence. His gift was an inquisitive mind which refused to be ring-fenced by academic boundaries and he acquired vast erudition about which he never boasted.

He was also a practical man who in his youth had been an athlete and an oarsman and, later, an enthusiast for Jaguar cars. His agreeable companionship was relished by all who knew him; he excelled as a conversationalist and storyteller.

North is survived by his wife, Marion, his son and two daughters.

Professor John D. North, historian of the exact sciences, was born on May 19, 1934. He died of cancer on October 31, 2008, aged 74

A Supplementary Biography of John David North (1934-2008)

Prof. North's *Festschrift*, [*Between Demonstration and Imagination. Essays in the History of Philosophy and Science Presented to John D. North* (ed. by Lodi Nauta and Arjo Vanderjagt), Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1999, pp. xviii, 424] contains (pp. 409-417) a list of his published works until 1998, not long before he retired from the University of Groningen (1999). As it seems unnecessary to repeat this bibliography here, we have included only a supplementary list of the publications which appeared after 1998. This list of *addenda* is clear proof that North's retirement did not imply an abandonment of his research activities, which indeed continued even in the two years and a few months in which he was seriously ill. We would like to express our gratitude here to John North's family, who have furnished us with a complete list of his works (excluding reviews).

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