John North (1934-2008): The Sherlock Holmes of the History of Science

It isn't often that the University of Groningen has been home to such an eminent scholar as the British historian of philosophy and science John North. Before he became professor at the Institute of Philosophy in Groningen in 1977, he studied the history of ideas and astronomy in Oxford and London and worked in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. He was regarded as one of the world's greatest experts in the history of astronomy and cosmology. His books span a period from Stonehenge to the black holes of modern astronomy. Last Friday he passed away at the age of 74 in Oxford, where he lived, after a long battle with illness.

North was the Sherlock Holmes of the History of Science. Just like Holmes, he specialized in solving unusual cases. He thus found unsuspected depths of meaning in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer from the fourteenth century. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales contain countless allusions to planets, stars and constellations. In Chaucer's Universe (1988), North demonstrated that the plots of various tales were based on heavenly phenomena from that time. Using medieval tables, almanacs, treatises and instruments, he was able to clear up many textual difficulties as well as date Chaucer's various poetic works. North's book was praised in the Times Literary Supplement as 'one of the century's monuments of scholarship' and it brought him many prestigious prizes. Shortly afterwards North started on his next 'case': Stonehenge. The idea that this monument had something to do with astronomical observations was not new. But after a thorough study of acres of Neolithic grave monuments, North gave a precise explanation of the purpose of this monument in his book Stonehenge: Neolithic Man and the Cosmos (1996). The stones served to make possible an observation of the setting midwinter sun, not (as had often been thought) of the rising midsummer sun. The stones worked as a kind of filter in this way. A couple of years later, North published a book on Hans Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors' from 1533, one which depicts two gentlemen standing either side of a table filled with scientific instruments. In the top corner it is just possible to make out a little crucifix, while lying in the foreground is a wildly deformed skull which however takes on normal proportions when sighted from a specific angle (a so-called anamorphosis). A study of all these elements, and mainly of the astronomical instruments on the table, led North to the striking conclusion that the painting indicates Good Friday, 11 April 1533, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, exactly 1500 years after Christ's death. At that time the sun would have been 27 degrees above London: exactly what the instruments on the table say. North went on to reveal more hidden meanings of an astronomical and geometrical kind in the painting.

North regularly met the scepticism you would expect, ironically enough, since he was no Dan Brown (of Da Vinci Code fame) but himself a sceptic from the empirical, common sense tradition of English philosophy and science. But he knew like no other the philosophical technologies and scientific instruments of earlier times, and how knowledge was applied in science, literature and art. In his books, always richly illustrated, he also brought a whole world picture to life. For him the history of science was not only a history of scientific theories and technologies but also, and preeminently, a history of people who wanted to understand, investigate and give a meaning to the world and the cosmos. His last work, from 2008, is a notable illustration of this: Cosmos: An Illustrated History of Astronomy and Cosmology, an 800-page history of man's ideas

of the cosmos from the oldest cave-paintings of the Palaeolithic to the most recent discoveries of the Hubble Telescope. Famous as he was, North remained a modest and charming man who wore his unusual erudition lightly at all times. He meant a lot to many different colleagues, undergraduates and postgraduates, even after his retirement in 1999 when he returned to his home in Oxford.

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