



Huib J. Zuidervaart and Rob H. van Gent, ***Between Rhetoric and Reality: Instrumental Practices at the Astronomical Observatory of the Amsterdam Society 'Felix Meritis', 1786-1889*** (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013, 152 pp., ISBN 978 90 8704 363 6).

Sites of eighteenth-century sociability frequently encompassed research and learning in the new sciences. In most places events around which the literate and financially comfortable gathered offered education or instruction, not original research. In this respect the aims of the Amsterdam Society, Felix Meritis, constituted a cross between the Royal Society in London and the Spalding Gentlemen's Society in Stamford. Felix Meritis possessed a serious observatory wherein new astronomical discoveries were to be pursued. This book traces the history of its use and in many instances its failure to become a site for serious, original observations.

Resolutely private and dues dependent like the Royal Society and the Spalding Society (which still exists), Felix Meritis began with visions of enlightenment and progress and by the mid-nineteenth century had become an elitist social club. So elite in fact, that when faced with the need to radically alter its mission and to admit new and different members, the existing ones chose to close it down in 1889. In its heyday, the society and its beautiful building on the Keizersgracht warranted a stop by any traveler, and its observatory offered splendid views of the city and the surrounding country side.

This book about the observatory is so exceedingly narrow in focus that reviewing it presents a challenge. Its treatment of the opening decades of the society's existence from 1787 onward is the most detailed and contextualized of the sections. We learn about the leadership role of Jan Hendrik van Swinden and the remarkable acquisition of the instruments sent from the Dutch scientific society in Batavia (today Jakarta). We are told that the times were politically turbulent without ever being enlightened as to the political positions stalked out by leaders such as Van Swinden. The lifetime of the society coincided with turmoil to be sure, but then also with the near bankruptcy of the state resulting from the taxes levied by the French during their occupation.

The building of the observatory had been intended to advance navigation to the benefit of commerce, but we never learn if this was ever accomplished. What is clear concerns the effect that Dutch economic decline had on the fortunes of Felix Meritis. Other institutions, private or based in the universities (where after 1814 instruction resumed in Latin), also appear lackluster in the period up to the mid-nineteenth century

when reform began in earnest. Pieter Nieuwland († 1794) made efforts to keep the society and its observatory vital, and indeed some of the first experiments to verify Lavoisier's new chemistry were conducted in the society's physics department. Nieuwland's early death and that of his successor, plus the pressing business that kept Van Swinden († 1823) away from the observatory meant that in this period it never lived up to its promise.

The book is lavishly illustrated complete with pictures of the surviving astronomical equipment as well as engravings of meeting rooms and the famous building that housed the society and its observatory. Yet when less familiar instruments are presented, as is the case with the Tellurium of 1634 († 97), we have a picture but no explanation of what could actually be done with it. Readers should not have to search the Internet in order to find a succinct account.

One element in the society's history seems to recur, its exclusivity. Woman and Jews were never admitted during its entire history, and various scientific practitioners, such as Franciscus Johannes Stamkart († 1882) had their membership delayed until they were determined to have sufficiently high social elevation. By the 1870s the society had become a place where only scientific demonstrations occurred, essentially an educational setting similar to what the Spalding society had been since its founding. Perhaps the size and growing strength of the Dutch universities proved its undoing although its social pretensions may also have been a culprit.

An appendix listing in Dutch all the instruments known to have been at the society's headquarters is valuable, and many of these have been deposited elsewhere or simply lost. A list of lecturers and instrument makers used over the hundred or so years of the society's existence is also helpful. The book is a truncated survey of a singular institution that makes a contribution to a history of science in the nineteenth century Netherlands.

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