

## WHAT 'TRACTRIX' IS ABOUT, AND WHY

### Editorial Statement at the Commencement of the New Yearbook

As is indicated by its subtitle, this yearbook is to be devoted to the history of the natural sciences, of medicine, of technology, and of mathematics. As is suggested by its title, it is to focus in particular, though far from exclusively, on the history of Dutch science and on Dutch contributions to the history of science. How this meaning can be inferred from what may well seem a rather enigmatic title for the new yearbook is clarified in the very first article of this issue where, among other topics, H.J.M. Bos traces Christiaan Huygens' research into the peculiar mathematical curve known as the tractrix.

Since 1978 the Dutch Society for the History of Medicine, Mathematics, Science, and Technology ('GeWiNa') has sponsored a quarterly with a name that fully comes up to the reputation our language has acquired for its tough pronunciation habits – the *Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis der Geneeskunde, Natuurwetenschappen, Wiskunde en Techniek*. Inevitably, its readership has been confined to those who can read Dutch. Over the past years the GeWiNa board has felt an increasing need to inform the world of historians of science, medicine, and technology at large of what goes on in the Netherlands in these fields of scholarship, and also to provide a forum for studies in the history of Dutch science, medicine, and technology. This long-standing desire has now materialized in the GeWiNa board bringing together a group of editors, and entrusting to these a mandate for launching an international yearbook.

So much for our brief history. Now as to content. Contributions to *Tractrix* will fall into two distinct classes: fully-fledged research articles, and materials coming under the general label of 'Services to the reader'.

In principle, *Tractrix* is interested in any topic that is situated inside, or alongside interesting edges of, the history of the natural sciences, of medicine, of technology, and of mathematics (from here on these four distinct areas will be designated together by the shorthand term 'history of science'). Within that broad field, three domains will particularly arouse our editorial appetites.

The first is, obviously, the history of Dutch science. This, to be sure, is not a niche of history that has gone ignored by the wider world. After all, science is an international enterprise before anything else, and contributions by Dutchmen to the world stock of science have received a good measure of attention from scholars all over the world. Nevertheless, we believe that there still are rich goldmines to be detected here that have remained underexploited owing at least in part to the language barrier. For example, Dutch science grew up in the 17th and 18th centuries almost entirely without the benefit of court patronage. In a recent attempt at a national historiography of science entitled *In het voetspoor van Stevin* ('On Stevin's Heels'), K. van Berkel explored both the peculiarities of the Dutch Republic which gave rise to this exceptional institutional setting and what this meant for the fate of science in the Netherlands. Inquiries along such lines seem to hold great interest for comparative studies of institutionalization patterns in science, yet before they can

even begin to make an impact they must first become known to the world at large. Or take the history of industrialization in the Netherlands. Because the Netherlands were so late in this, and because when it finally occurred industrialization took place in a unique political setting known among political scientists as 'pillarization', our country has quite tasty stuff to offer to students of technology diffusion. *Tractrix* aims to provide a forum for those who wish to study typically Dutch topics in such wider frameworks. And of course, archival collections in this country still abound in materials pertinent to the history of science and its prominent practitioners that need no justification whatsoever to be presented to the world at large in the form of research articles.

Next, *Tractrix* aims to provide a forum for Dutch scholars. It is emphatically not our intention to revert the brain drain, and to rob other journals of the privilege of publishing outstanding work by historians of science who happen to be Dutch. Our own selection criteria will in no lesser measure than theirs be directed at scholarly excellence in the first place. However, we do feel that the Dutch community of historians of science, and its junior members in particular, may benefit from the existence of an international yearbook radiating from a center in the Netherlands.

Finally, we wish to open our yearbook to authors outside of the two domains just defined. There are no limits of principle here, yet we naturally have our own predilections in, and around, the history of science. We care for the well-written, for the crisp, for what is no less fun to read for its solid standing as thorough and meticulously reliable scholarship. More than anything we care for what is original and daring. We care for articles whose authors give every sign of having become obsessed with a problem of their own making, and of having pursued it relentlessly across whatever artificial academic boundaries they may have encountered. We believe that there are wide domains of problems which are very relevant to the history of science but tend not to be taken up because they straddle too many distinct academic disciplines. Examples abound; the reader finds some specimens in the present issue.

The above is not to suggest that we wish to focus in a one-sided manner on 'external' approaches to the history of science, let alone on specific labels or 'isms' standing for whatever approach succeeds in catching collective fancies. We look forward in particular to efforts that manage to combine in a fruitful way 'internal' and 'external' approaches to the history of science. Our editorial policy is characterized by an omnivorous lack of doctrinal preferences – we care for whatever approach helps to elucidate aspects of the history of science in the widest sense.

Services to the reader will be rendered in a variety of ways. In every issue we shall inform the reader of dissertations completed in the Netherlands. State-of-the-art overviews will appear on selected topics in Dutch history. There is no regular book review section; however, extensive essay reviews will be devoted to selected books that cover important aspects of Dutch history. Under the heading 'Dutch Classics' one article-length 'jewel-a-year', to be chosen from the works of the Grand Old Men in Dutch historiography of science, will appear in translation.

These are our plans. As well as we could, we have set up this first issue as an embodiment of the ideals outlined above. We hope that many are to follow.

On behalf of the editorial board,

H. Floris Cohen