

Eric John Aiton (1923–91)

Eric Aiton was one of those modest and self-effacing historians whose important contributions to scholarship and international reputation were apparently unrecognized by the institution in which he taught. They were indeed quite apart from his work there. His official occupation was training teachers of mathematics, and his work in the history of mathematics, physics and astronomy was done in his spare time, often indeed late at night or in the small hours of the morning. As well as his published research he also gave distinguished service to the leadership of learned societies. His interests were in the internal development of mathematical and scientific ideas and their philosophical implications rather than in the latterly more fashionable pursuit of their sociology.

He was born in Edinburgh, but when he was only a few months old his family moved to the Yorkshire village of Chapel Allerton, where his father was a coal miner. Eric went to the village school, and then at the age of eleven to Doncaster Technical School after failing the grammar school entrance exam. However, a second chance was granted to those who did well at the Technical School. At the age of thirteen he transferred to Thorne Grammar School, from which he achieved entrance to Manchester University in September 1941, a crucial turning point in his life. In wartime, nine academic terms were concentrated into twenty-seven months. No doubt it was for that reason that he missed a First when in December 1943 he took his B.Sc. in Mathematics, with subsidiary Physics. He was, however, awarded the Dalton Mathematical Scholarship in 1942. The War also determined his next move, which was to the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, where he served as a Junior Scientific Officer from January 1944 to September 1945. After the War he turned to his chosen career as a teacher. After a year at Godalming County Grammar School and two years at Westwoods Grammar School, Northleach, he spent the academic year 1948–49 at the Department of Education in Oxford, where he took a Diploma in Education. Then after two terms at Marling School, Stratford, he joined the staff of Bablake School in Coventry in May 1950.

It was there that he was able to take up his second career as a historian in earnest. In 1954 he took the London M.Sc. in the History and Philosophy of Science as a part-time student through University College. Parts of his dissertation on ‘The development of the theory of tides in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ were quickly published in *Annals of Science* in 1954 and 1955. In 1958, only four years later (that is, faster than many full-time students) he was awarded his Ph.D. for a thesis on ‘The vortex theory of planetary motions’, which covered the work of such major figures as Descartes, Galileo and Leibniz. It led to a number of papers in *Annals of Science* and *Isis* and was the basis of his first book, published in 1972.

Meanwhile, in 1959 he had taken up the post of Senior Mathematics Master at Hulme Grammar School in Oldham, where he lived for the rest of his life. Finally he was appointed a lecturer at Didsbury College of Education, which later became part of

Manchester Polytechnic. Although he was able to teach some history in the Polytechnic, his days were still occupied with mathematical education, and he was active in the Manchester branch of the Mathematical Association. Nevertheless, his research continued. Much of it was on the work of Kepler, and led to a series of papers on the development of Kepler's thought and to an edition with commentary of the *Mysterium Cosmographicum*, published in 1981 along with a translation which I made at his suggestion and with considerable help from him.

However, he needed very little help with his own translation of Peurbach's *Theoriae novae planetarum*, published in *Osiris* in 1987. As well as fluent German, he had developed what can only have been a memory of schoolboy Latin to an excellent standard and had taught himself to read ancient Greek with considerable proficiency. At the same time he was writing his splendid biography of Leibniz, published in 1984, and producing wider studies of celestial mechanics which led to his papers on 'The contributions of Isaac Newton, Johann Bernoulli and Jakob Herrmann to the inverse problem of central forces' and on 'Polygons and parabolas: some problems concerning the dynamics of planetary orbits', both published in 1989. At the time of his death he had nearly finished his share in the forthcoming edition of the *Opera Omnia* of Euler, a major achievement. The translation, with commentary, of Kepler's *Harmonice Mundi*, in which Dr J. V. Field and I collaborated but he had the major share, was complete before he died and will be published in 1992.

As well as his frequent contributions to conferences in other European countries and in the United States, he had greatly enjoyed a lecture tour of Japan as well as friendship with several Japanese colleagues. The lectures which he gave on that tour were published in Japanese, and a Japanese translation of his biography of Leibniz is to appear in the near future. Thus his productivity continued until the end of his life. He was awarded a D.Sc. by the University of London in 1987. Yet these were not his only services to the history of mathematics and science. He was a long-standing member of the Editorial Board of *Annals of Science*, and had also served on the Editorial Boards of other influential journals such as *Isis* and *Historia Mathematica*. In addition to a spell on the Council of the BSHS from 1972 to 1975, he was President of the British Society for the History of Mathematics from 1988 until his death.

Though a quiet, self-contained man who lived alone for most of his life, Eric had many friends, not only among fellow historians in many countries but also in the musical world of Manchester, for he played chamber music as a violinist as well as regularly attending concerts by the Halle Orchestra. He seemed to be making a good recovery from a sudden illness which struck him in the summer of 1990, but it was not to be. *Multis ille bonis febilis occidit.*

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