By Cornelis D. Andriesse
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A scientist writing book history
As far back as the seventeenth century Archbishop Ussher of Armagh managed with extraordinary precision – and from our enlightened perspective enviable naiveté – to calculate the exact day on which God set out to create heaven and earth. This was Sunday 23 October 4004 BCE. Although the outcome of his calculations has since been discredited, it remains a remarkable milestone in the history of ideas to this day.


However, we don't have far to go to see the connection. Opening the book at Chapter 1, the very first sentences proclaim that:

The universe is 13.7 billion years old. Let that be said straightaway. Not 13.6 or 13.8 billion years. So accurate is the message of the strange cold light that fills the cosmos and all of outer space. [...] The very idea that a final answer exists for the age of the world...

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Immediately following his lapidary pronouncement of the ‘final answer’ to the question about the world's age, Andriesse proceeds to discuss other estimates, made in earlier, scientifically more benighted times. Ussher's famous pronouncement is, however, surprisingly not one of them. Why? Was Ussher's method not sufficiently scientific? If not, then what to make of the examples Andriesse does cite? Was Georges-Louis Buffon's eighteenth-century tally of 75,000 years more 'scientific' just because it made the earth older than Ussher's painstaking calculation? If so, was the 'bright Scot' William Thomson even more right, and therefore more scientific, with his estimate of 98 million years, which he published in the Philosophical Magazine in 1863? More importantly, if everyone got it wrong before, can we trust that 13.7 billion years is the right figure? I will return to these matters shortly.

In Messengers: A History of Science Publishing, 1930–1980 Andriesse adds a fascinating chapter to the long and remarkable history of the Dutch contribution to international scientific publishing. The book focuses on what is known in the trade as STM (science, technology and medical) publishing, which began in the Early Modern period, with the occasional bit of social science and humanities thrown in. Apart from giving an account of the major expansion of the Dutch role in international science publishing in that half century, Andriesse announces in his introduction that he proposes to answer the question how the Dutch contribution grew to become so disproportionately large. It is by no means a new question, but to date it still hasn't received a satisfactory answer.

Before the actual text of the book begins (with the statement about the age of the world we have already encountered) the reader has already leafed through a four-page preface and a 32-page gallery of portraits of many of the book's main protagonists. The prominent location of that portrait gallery, as well as its generous size, is significant. One of the author's main points is the importance of individuals in the developments he describes. The emphasis on the individual also fits well, incidentally, with Andriesse's somewhat quirky, highly personable style. In placing his personalities squarely inside the wider social and scientific context, Andriesse mixes an old-fashioned celebration of Great Individuals with social history and history of ideas. Some names in his pantheon of Great Individuals in publishing will be more widely familiar, like Wouter Nijhoff, Dolf van den Brink and Pierre Vinken, but others did not necessarily play less important roles for being less – or at least less publicly – known. In all cases Andriesse stresses the importance of the personal element in the texture of chaos and happenstance of history: chance meetings, the chemistry of friendship versus the friction of incompatible personalities, and the unpredictable ways in which individuals are affected by the trends and beliefs that are current at a particular economic, social and political conjuncture.
In the case of scientific publications, an important aspect of that wider juncture is obviously the vicissitudes of scientific research itself. So Andriesse draws many links between developments in publishing and events in the scientific world. As a scientist himself, he is well aware of the importance of the major scientific breakthroughs in making – and breaking – scientific fields. He has a good eye for the way publishing follows the often rapid shifts in scientific focus and, more notably in the period under scrutiny, the breakup of formerly large unified areas into smaller but rapidly expanding new, and increasingly specialised, fields. Often publishers follow such developments at a slight remove, closing down operations when a market has become saturated, or conversely starting up new ventures when new scientific concepts, such as the quantum or the gene, start to be productive. Occasionally you get the sense that a single deft publishing decision as it were brings into being a new field of research. Naming a journal or book series helps to conceptualise the field it is meant to cover, thus making it more visible, and legitimising it in the eyes of the world and, not unimportantly, in the eyes of administrators and funding agencies.

Specialisation, and the coming into being of ever newer fields of scientific research, is one of the fascinating themes of the book: the scientific turbulence of the time is fully reflected in the world of publishing. In this connection the brief piece of history of science with which the book opens is also of particular interest. Not only does it draw attention to the ever-evolving nature of scientific insight, but it also leads one to wonder if here, too, we may be seeing the process of scientific specialisation at work. Is it coincidence that the estimates of the age of the world cited show exponential growth? If not, may this growth and the increasing correctness (if that is indeed what it is) of the figures correlate with the increasing specialisation that has historically attended the scientific revolution? And does that confirm our knowledge and understanding of the natural world not so much vacillates, but actually progresses? Even so, if we agree to call all of the earlier calculations of the world’s age ‘scientific’, the only way to bridge the discrepancy between the various outcomes seems to be to regard science somehow as a matter of interpretation of the ‘facts’ – including of course the decision which observations to interpret as facts in the first place. It does lead one to ponder again the question if – outside of poetry, and perhaps mathematics – facts of any permanence actually exist.

And so that same bold opening statement about the age of the world also, and perhaps more interestingly, draws attention to another central – if submerged – theme in the book: the tension between scientific and humanistic forms of scholarship. The confident presentation of scientific facts sits uneasily with the pursuit of history, which is always interpretation, always bound by current wisdom: a narrative needing to be retold over and over again to suit the local and temporal conditions of humanity’s current insights and understanding of the world. These tensions are particularly strong in the face of the author’s own almost religious faith in the status of scientific truth evinced in many places in the book.

But enough of these philosophic musings. The subject at hand is the importance of the Dutch contribution to twentieth-century scientific publishing. This is notable by any standards, but extraordinary in relation to the country’s size. Historically, we have witnessed this state of affairs before. The pivotal role of the seventeenth-century Dutch book trade in the dissemination of scholarship in Europe has been extensively documented. But the remarkable way the Dutch book trade managed to climb back out of the slump it had slid into in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has not yet received a similarly in-depth and comprehensive treatment. Of course this is in no small measure the consequence of the fact that there is so much more material – which it is not necessarily easy to access – and less historical distance from which to study it.

So what about Andriesse’s central and intriguing question? Why was the Dutch presence on the international scene so disproportional? For a book historian it is tempting to look first for historical continuities. Andriesse does mention the need for retrospection, but does not really look back much beyond 1900, except anecdotally. This is a pity, as the position in the history of Dutch nineteenth-century publishing of the first and oldest of the publishing houses attended the scientiﬁc revolution? And does that conﬁrm that our knowledge and understanding of the natural world not so much vacillates, but actually progresses? Even so, if we agree to call all of the earlier calculations of the world’s age ‘scientiﬁc’, the only way to bridge the discrepancy between the various outcomes seems to be to regard science somehow as a matter of interpretation of the ‘facts’ – including of course the decision which observations to interpret as facts in the first place. It does lead one to ponder again the question if – outside of poetry, and perhaps mathematics – facts of any permanence actually exist.

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