

OBITUARY

R. J. FORBES

On 13 January 1973 Professor R. J. Forbes passed away at his home at Haarlem, The Netherlands.

Robert James Forbes was of Scottish origin. He was born at Breda on 12 April 1900, but his childhood was spent mainly in China. After graduating in 1923 as *chemisch ingenieur* at the Technical University, Delft, he joined the Royal Dutch-Shell Group, where he was active in several fields. In the period 1925–31 he worked at the oil refinery of the Group at Balikpapan, Borneo. After his return to Holland he became a member of the Group's research laboratory in Amsterdam and there studied bitumen and its applications. In later years he directed the standardization of analytical methods within the Group. After his retirement in 1959 he was attached as adviser on historiography to the Board of the Royal Dutch-Shell.

At a very early age Forbes's interest was aroused by the history of science and technology, especially that of Antiquity. With funds from the Allard Pierson Foundation he was appointed professor at the University of Amsterdam (Faculty of Arts) in 1947. Twelve years later he was made extraordinary professor in the history of physics and chemistry at the same university (Faculty of Science). In 1953 Forbes was awarded a doctorate *honoris causa* by Technion, the young Technical University of Haifa, and in 1959 he was appointed a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences. In addition he was Honorary Vice-President of the Newcomen Society, and holder of the Leonardo da Vinci Medal of the Society for the History of Technology, U.S.A.

After the death of Dr J. A. Bierens de Haan in 1958, Forbes was appointed Secretary of the Dutch Society of Sciences at Haarlem, of which society he had been a member since 1946. In this position at the oldest learned society in the Netherlands, he took the initiative in a series of books on the life and work of one of his most illustrious predecessors, Martinus van Marum (1750–1837). The first three volumes of this publication have been published under his editorship in 1969, 1970, and 1971. At his own request, Forbes was relieved of his secretarial post in 1969 because of ill health; he was succeeded by Professor A. Quispel.

Professor Forbes, who was prominent in the revival of the study of the history of science and technology both in Holland and internationally, published more than thirty books and over two hundred articles. Two titles that deserve special mention are: *Studies in ancient technology* (9 volumes) and *Bibliographia antiqua. Philosophia naturalis* (10 vols.). It is of course through his specialized articles in journals that we can best evaluate his most important and most personal contributions to the study of history; but Forbes did not write simply for his scholarly colleagues. Among his more popular works were: *Man the maker*, which has been translated into five languages, and *A history of science and technology*, the Pelican Book that he wrote in collaboration with the Dutch scientist Dr E. J. Dijksterhuis. One of his last contributions was the essay 'The conquest of Nature and its consequences' in volume I of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Jubilee series *Britannica perspectives* (Chicago *et al.*, 1968). The essay is a plain testimony of his wisdom and humanity.

In Professor Forbes we have lost a scholar of great and versatile talents.

E. LEFEBVRE
J. G. DE BRUIJN