THE WASHINGTON COPERNICUS SYMPOSIUM


This large-sized volume of 616 pages presents the proceedings of a sequence of events, organized jointly by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Academy of Sciences. A programme committee, with J. A. Wheeler as chairman, selected the topics to be presented and discussed at the sessions held in Washington in April 1973.

The book opens with the highlights of the impressive and varied “Festival”, including a selection of photographs from “The Age of Copernicus”, a documentary show by Charles Eames.

The main bulk of the volume consists of papers read at a Copernican symposium and at three “collegia”, on “Science and society in the sixteenth century”, on the “Interplay of literature, art, and science”, and on “Science, philosophy, and religion in historical perspective”. The collegia ran parallel to the symposium and they formed the extension of the symposium, which dealt with a larger historical spectrum from the Age of Copernicus to the contemporary science and its perspectives.

The book’s range exceeds that of publications reviewed customarily in this journal. Its strength lies in authoritative and compact papers both on the science of the Renaissance and on other central questions in history of science; papers which retain their validity and discussion-promoting qualities in the following years. In fact, the discussion on some subjects could be reopened in connection with the Einstein Centenary.

For the historian of astronomy one of the highlights of the volume is to be found in the paper by Westman (and in the ensuing discussion), “The Wittenberg interpretation of the Copernican theory”, dealing with the most important period of the early post-Copernican astronomy and cosmology.

From the variety of contributions on modern science, attention is drawn to Werner Heisenberg’s “Tradition in science” and his interventions in the following discussion. Perhaps one of his last public enunciations, Heisenberg’s contribution is striking as a first-hand report of a more human, dramatic component in the development of modern physics—a somewhat neglected factor in the current methodologies of scientific creation.

Editing this complex and bulky volume was a difficult task done with great success by Owen Gingerich. One misprint (a distorted name) is duly recorded (p. 34).

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