REVIEW OF PUBLICATIONS


Despite the fact that this work was published more than three years ago and despite the fact that it is the most important scholarly paper in English dealing with the first conceptions of the telescope, Albert van Helden’s The Invention of the Telescope has probably not been widely read. Van Helden is Associate Professor of History at Rice University and has a working knowledge of several languages, and although not a direct translation, the present work is based on Cornelis de Waard’s De uitvinding der verrekijkers (The Hague, 1906). De Waard brought to light many new documents relating to the telescope, but the original Dutch work has only partially been translated, and only summaries and second-hand accounts have appeared in English. The strength of this monograph lies in the completeness of the collection of documents and translations. Van Helden’s analysis of the documents, in the introductory essay, will help the reader form his own conclusions from the mass of conflicting evidence even though the reader may not fully agree with the arguments presented.

The scenario for the genesis of the telescope is essentially the same as that presented by Henry King in The History of the Telescope (London, 1955). However, van Helden’s discussion of the references to the use of lenses which predate the first Dutch makers is very interesting, revealing and much more extensive than King’s treatment of the topic. It reveals a widespread knowledge of the possibility of combining lenses to form an enlarged image of distant objects. The 13th-century references of Roger Bacon to optical experiments are dealt with carefully and, as others before him, van Helden rejects the possibility that Bacon was actually in possession of a telescope. More difficult to assess are the writings of John Dee, Giovanbaptista Della Porta, Leonard and Thomas Digges, and William Bourne. They laid the foundations of lens theory and their familiarity with the effects produced by lenses and mirrors would make it highly probable that they attempted to combine them. However, the descriptions given by these writers of the powers of such experimental instruments raise doubts
