

45 Years of Heck in Professional Astronomy

by Joe Hube

The logo for Vengeance features the word "Vengeance" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A small, yellow, four-pointed star is positioned above the letter 'V'. Below the text, there is a faint, light blue circular graphic element.

Vengeance

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Het papier is geduldig meer dan mannen¹.
(Frank 1942)

*The past is a foreign country.
They do things differently there.*
(Hartley 1953)

*[Un des] principaux inconvénients du système [français est]
une prime aux diplômes “franco-français” des grandes écoles par rapport
à des universités étrangères pourtant de fait plus prestigieuses à l’international,
mais que les Français ne connaissent pas et reconnaissent trop peu².*
(Attali 2016)

¹The paper is more patient than men.

²[One of the] major drawbacks of the [French] system is a bonus given to the “Franco-French” degrees of the *Grandes Écoles* [Elite Schools] relatively to foreign universities however *de facto* more renowned internationally, but that the French ignore and do not appreciate enough.

45 Years of Heck in Professional Astronomy

Foreword

This volume is devoted to the itinerary and professional activities of Astronomer André Heck. His international career spanned the period 1969-2014, in various countries and at a time many scientists were still happily spending their whole career at a single institution. The vagaries of life decided otherwise for Heck.

This is the story of a Belgian scientist of humble origins whose name was assigned to a comet he discovered at the age of 26 at Haute Provence Observatory, who was in charge at 31 of the science operations on the then most advanced astronomy satellite from a European Space Agency station in Spain, and who later ended up at the top level for astronomers in France after pushing forward new fields and acting as a catalyst for novel approaches.

His activities touched quite a variety of observational and theoretical matters. These ranged from meridian astronomy to space spectroscopy via ground-based photographic, photometric and spectroscopic collection of data, and from studies in stellar evolution to pioneering facets of astronomical information handling and applications of advanced statistical analysis. Time-consuming routine service for the benefit of his professional community should not be forgotten, be it at manning observing instruments or at shaping databases of world-wide usage.

Along the way, he became a prolific author of papers and reference books, both for a specialized audience and for the public at large. He also produced quite a number of edited volumes, including the prize-winning series *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy* tackling many facets of the way astronomy-related activities are conducted round the world, the “sociology of astronomy”. Towards the end of his professional life, Heck set up his own non-commercial publishing venture *Venngeist*.

Specialists in bibliography consider Heck as one of the most published authors in the history of astronomy³.

He also devoted a good chunk of his time to historical research and to public outreach, some of it under a pen name. He used to say that these two components of his activities – digging into the past and retaining close contacts with the society at large – were complementary of the exploratory ones, be it at the level of the sociology of astronomy or of the evolution of astronomy communication, the future of which he investigated with two colloquia he inspired in later years, at the Royal Academy in Brussels in 2007 and at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in 2010.

³See for instance the note by M.J. Kurtz in the references section (p. 353).

The present volume has been compiled thanks to material put at our disposal by Heck himself. The reader will find a pretty exhaustive compilation of his astronomy-related publications together with extensive indices enabling to move around the dense forest of matters tackled, places mentioned and people he interacted with.

We also included, from Heck's personal file, a brief curriculum vitae summarizing his professional highlights together with a couple of published biographies, citations and letters of reference, followed by lists of collaborators, missions and meetings attended. Elaborate scientific considerations have been left out as interested readers can find all details in the quoted papers.

This book remains as factual as possible while leaving out many anecdotes and secondary events in order to stay within a reasonable size for this volume. Do not expect private ruminations here, even if we are saying a few words of the vagaries of life alluded in the opening of this foreword, such as the sudden ministerial decision to fire about 200 members from Liège University in the mid-1970s – forcing Heck to pursue his career abroad while he was in the process of getting a tenure at that institution – or the cerebrovascular ailment that hit him in the late 1980s, leaving him with a partial permanent disability. This triggered his resignation from the directorship of Strasbourg Observatory and a reorientation of his activities, basically at his own expenses in a not-always-easy local context.

Our biographee has put together, essentially for the benefit of historians of astronomy, private memories the release of which will be authorized only *post mortem*. He is expressing and documenting there personal views and comments on key turns of his career, on various incidents he experienced or witnessed, as well as on some colorful and problematic characters he met. The names of these have been deliberately omitted in the present volume, rather putting the emphasis on those Heck takes pleasure praising.

We owe to the biographee the authorization to use an abundant iconography in which we digged virtually at will. We thank all those who assisted us along the redaction of this book to clarify specific points or who provided us with additional pictures.

We hope we succeeded in illustrating through this volume the many professional facets of a man who spent a significant part of his activities pioneering new fields and developing original approaches – a dedication repeatedly commended in the evaluation processes he had to go through in France⁴ – and whose view on the noble mission of astronomy was depicted in several of his books as “understanding the universe, as well as the place and rôle of man in it”, an expression sometimes reproduced verbatim by others without quoting its source.

Joe Hube,
June 2016.

⁴See e.g. p. 277.