



Duane Henry DuBose Roller

PROGRAM BUILDER, BOOKMAN, TEACHER.

By Kenneth L. Taylor

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY that a faculty member is hired for the purpose of establishing a course of study in a discipline just coming into existence. That is what happened in 1954 when the University of Oklahoma appointed Duane H.D. Roller as Assistant Professor. His twofold job was to curate the recently founded collection of old science books donated to OU Libraries by alumnus E.L. DeGolyer, and to inaugurate a teaching program in the history of science.

True, science's development had already been the object of study for several generations. It had drawn the sporadic interest of a small cadre of writers, more often among scientists pursuing an avocation, or philosophers keen to understand scientific knowledge's special authority, than within the ranks of professional historians. But following World War II universities began to give formal recognition to the history of science as a distinct academic field, founding programs to train Ph.D. specialists. In the U.S., Harvard, Cornell, and

Wisconsin led the way. When Duane secured authorization in the 1950s to create OU's doctoral program, it was the fourth one established in this country.

Duane's arrival in Norman was actually a kind of homecoming. His father, Duane Emerson Roller, had served OU with distinction for a decade as professor of physics during the son's adolescence. Consequently, young Duane had a ready-made circle of acquaintances among his father's colleagues and friends prepared to offer supportive encouragement for

his ambition to carve out a presence at OU for history of science. One such well-wisher was George L. Cross, then marking a decade since elevation from his faculty position in botany to the institution's presidency.

Having graduated from Columbia in 1941, Duane served as a Navy radar officer during the war. He then earned his M.S. degree in experimental physics at Purdue (1949) before moving on to Harvard for his doctorate in the history of science. At Harvard he was deeply engaged in the recently reformed General Education program in the Natural Sciences sector, in which Harvard President (and chemist) James Bryant Conant was actively involved.

Charismatic and self-assured, Duane applied himself energetically to the tasks of building up OU's History of Science Collections (so renamed when the DeGolyer Collection was augmented by other donations) and the new instructional program at both undergraduate and graduate levels. He carried course teaching loads beyond the norm, pushing up enrollments, and then argued successfully with administration for the hiring of more faculty to meet the growing demand. By the end of two decades OU had a history of science program with six faculty members.

Duane had comparable success in securing administrative support for expanding the Collections. With funds raised from private donors through the OU Foundation, for many a summer Duane and his wife, Marjorie, frequented the shops of European antiquarian book dealers. The stream of acquisitions was such that, by the time of Duane's retirement in 1990, the Collections had grown from about 5,000 to over 80,000 books.

A remarkable thing about Duane's vision for the Collec-

tions was their operation not only as a repository of rare books but also as a teaching-and-research workspace for the History of Science graduate program's students and faculty. The expanding holdings' particular strengths included a reflection of Duane's own research interests, which initially centered on physical science in the Scientific Revolution (16th-17th centuries). But Duane insisted on a comprehensive acquisition policy; he often said the Collections' goal, however unattainable, should be to get a copy of every book ever written in the domain of science! Yet he also was vigilant regarding opportunities to build on existing strengths, such as geology (a special interest of DeGolyer's) and Darwinism.

The broad scope of the Collections' acquisition policy meshed with Duane's perspective on the discipline's teaching agenda, compassing all of Western science from its ancient beginnings to the present. Duane was a fine raconteur, and his great popularity as a lecturer rested partly on his ability to enliven history through dramatic narratives. Perhaps his favorite theme depicted the ongoing effort to understand nature as a contest between two philosophies: A Platonic-idealistic strain stressing the perfection of abstraction, matched against an Aristotelian-empiricist tradition centered on the comparatively messy business of sensory experience. Duane's storytelling was legendary not only in the classroom, but also as he showed off the Collections to visitors, whether the guests were OU students, schoolkids, curious citizens, or visiting dignitaries. Duane regularly did this with such panache that he ranked about equally with the venerable old books among OU's most prized cultural assets. ●

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Tuscan Treasures

Treasures of Tuscany: Renaissance in Arezzo introduces visitors to Arezzo's major artists, goldsmithery, textiles, and incunables, many of which have never before been exhibited outside Italy. Organized by the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, *Treasures of Tuscany* is the first international exhibition devoted entirely to the Aretinian Renaissance with artworks drawn from more than 20 Italian institutions and private collections. The exhibition will run through Jan. 28. Admission to the museum is always free.