

Pierre Costabel (1912–1989)

Pierre Costabel was born at Draguignan (Département du Var) on 24 October 1912. After attending the Ecole Normale Supérieure (1932–1935), he became Professeur agrégé of mathematics at Caen-Cherbourg from 1936 to the outbreak of war. He was a P.O.W. from 1940 to 1945. He became Attaché partiel at the CNRS in 1948, working on general mechanics (1948–1953) and philosophy (1954–1956). In 1950 he became a priest of the Oratoire de France, and in 1952 was appointed Director of the Ecole Massillon, a post he held until 1960. He then joined the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (VIe Section), as Chef de travaux 1960–1962, sous-Directeur d'Etudes 1962–1963 and, from 1963, as Directeur d'Etudes together with René Taton, also Directeur d'Etudes, at the Centre de Recherches d'Histoire des Sciences et des Techniques (later Centre de Recherches Alexandre Koyré).

Father Costabel was Secrétaire perpétuel of the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences from 1965 to 1983, and became Secrétaire perpétuel d'honneur in 1985. He had been Editor-in-Chief of the *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* during 1959–1965, and thereafter successively a member of the journal's Conseil de Direction and Comité de Rédaction. On the national scene, he was Secretary of the Groupe Français d'Historiens des Sciences 1957–1973, Secretary (1957–1979) and Vice-President (1983) of the Comité National d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences, and from 1977 a member of the Comité de Rédaction of the monograph series *Cahiers d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences*.

He was admitted to the Académie des Sciences on 20 June 1983, as Correspondant en sciences mécaniques, the only historian of science, it seems, to be accorded this high honour since 1900, when Duhem was elected Correspondant in the same section.

He worked principally on mechanics and the mathematical sciences from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. A comprehensive survey of his many publications would be out of place here, but I might mention his pioneering studies of Descartes and his contemporaries, and an invaluable collection of previously published papers, *Démarches originales de Descartes savant* (1982); *Leibniz et la dynamique* (1960, 2nd edn 1981); editions of Florimond de Beaune's *Doctrine de l'angle solide* (1973), *Les Nouvelles pensées de Galilée de Mersenne* (1975), Descartes' *Exercices pour les éléments des solides: Essai en complément d'Euclide* (1987), commentaries and analyses (notably of the collision theory) in the Robinet edition of Malebranche's *Oeuvres*, and the mathematical notes and appendices in Jean-Luc Marion's translation of Descartes' *Regulae* (1977); *La question des forces vives* (1983); untiring editorial work on the Euler-Maupertuis correspondence (*Euleri opera omnia*), the Jean Bernoulli–Varignon correspondence (*Die gesammelten Werke der Mathematiker und Physiker der Familie Bernoulli*) and, as principal editor, the *nouvelle présentation* of the Adam & Tannery edition of Descartes' *Oeuvres* (1964–1974).

Wherever one looks in Father Costabel's *oeuvre*, one finds profound scholarship, an unerring historical instinct, stylistic elegance, and perceptive textual analysis assisted by a sharp eye for the unsuspected mathematical or philosophical subtlety. One does not find pretension or self-importance, imprecision of thought, or what he himself once described as 'des visions générales sur la base de thèses peu encombrées de références précises, mais attrayantes par leur système'. He was a great and justly revered scholar, whose passing marks the end of an era in the history of the profession. No one who had the privilege of knowing or working with him will forget his many personal kindnesses, especially to younger scholars, his humour and good sense, his humanity and understanding. Visiting him at the Centre Koyré, just beside the Bibliothèque Nationale, being in his company during a conference, or simply meeting him for lunch and a chat, was always a valued moment of personal warmth and intellectual enrichment.

He died suddenly on 20 November 1989, after collapsing near his home at Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, quartier de La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire (Département du Val de Marne). He lies close by in the Cimetière Condé.

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