



A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rogier Vanhoorne". The signature is fluid and has a long, sweeping flourish at the end.

Photograph by courtesy of M. Van Waerebeke

ROGIER VANHOORNE — AN APPRECIATION

It is no simple matter to sketch the life history of a man as diverse as Professor Vanhoorne. The following account makes no attempt at completeness, being largely a personal impression of the man I have known for 16 years.

Rogier Vanhoorne was born in the historic town of Bruges on the 3rd of February 1920 and grew up amid the West Flemish countryside, which was to have such an important influence on his later scientific career. With a view to a career in the landforces, he was sent to a Military School in St. Truiden. In 1939 he was admitted to the Royal Military Academy in Brussels, only

to be swept up in the ill-fated Belgian campaign at the beginning of World War II. Cut off in the south of France by the capitulation, he and a few of his friends tried to cross the demarcation line only to be made prisoners of war by the Germans. Interned for a short time, he was set free on the condition that he did not involve himself in anti-German activities. In November 1940 he enrolled at the State University of Ghent where he opted for Botany at a time when this subject received little attention in the media. At that time there were only two professors in the whole of the Department and self-study was one of the major means of gaining learning. One of the obligatory subjects was palaeobotany, but since his superiors were not competent to lecture on the subject he was given D.H. Scott's "Studies in Fossil Botany" to read. This work fired his interest and he was able to persuade the Professor of Botany to allow him to undertake a pollen analysis for his B.Sc. thesis. It is to Professor G. Verplancke's credit that although he was unable to help his prodigy himself, he sent him to the Royal Natural History Museum in Brussels to learn the techniques. So began a long-standing association with the well-known palaeobotanist François Stockmans. Rogier Vanhoorne graduated with First Class Honours in 1944 and became Stockman's aide at the Natural History Museum.

Stockmans and Vanhoorne worked together on a number of occasions, but will probably be best remembered for their joint monograph on the Holocene peat from the Belgian coastal plain, which was published in 1954. Rogier often recounted how he and Stockmans had to do everything by bicycle: transporting the peat-borer and getting the specimens back to the railway station intact — no easy matter in the days before polythene bags! Despite these problems, I can well imagine that Vanhoorne revelled in this outdoor activity. Fieldwork is his forte, as anybody who has had the pleasure to accompany him into the field will tell you. Even in his sixties he is still untiring, taking on work one would expect a technician to do. He has always preferred working on exposures in order to be able to examine the profiles in more detail and to choose where to collect material for carpological or palynological examination. If there wasn't a suitable exposure at the right spot then a pit was dug, as some farmers learnt to their cost. On one occasion Rogier returned to find a cow in the trench!

For all his botanical training his prime interest has always been in resolving stratigraphical problems. This has made him a much sought-after person in geological and archaeological circles in France and Belgium. His co-operation with the Quaternary geologist Roland Paepe is worth mentioning, for it lead e.g. to a clarification of the stratigraphy of the Lower Pleistocene Campine clay. On one occasion when he was in the middle of this work Professor Vanhoorne accidentally visited a pit being exploited by the Merkplas Borstal and was almost taken for a detainee!

His teaching career began in 1947 with a short spell at the Antwerp Grammar School. After the war a number of other grammar schools had been established in the Antwerp area and there was strong competition between these institutions for pupils. Rogier remembers how the Headmaster

hinted that "there are no bad pupils, only bad teachers". Not long after his appointment in Antwerp he was offered a job as naturalist at the Natural History Museum in Brussels, which he happily accepted. This job with its educational rôle required someone with initiative and good didactic qualities. Moreover, this appointment gave him the opportunity of continuing his research. This research on the Pleistocene vegetational history of Northern Belgium was presented in the form of a Ph.D. thesis in 1957. That his abilities did not go unheeded is reflected in his promotion in 1963 to Laboratory Director. When the University of Antwerp was established in 1965 he was appointed to the Chair of Botany. However, he never relinquished his ties with Brussels and was given a room in the basement, where he could continue his research undisturbed.

His lectures will long be remembered for their clarity of presentation and the way in which the fundamental issues were drummed in by means of question and answer. Coming from a job in a Scientific Institution must have created its problems when it came to assessing the students. Certainly Professor Vanhoorne felt it his duty to sift the good from the bad students and rarely gave figures close to the pass-mark. This lead some students to feel that they had been discriminated against. However, what the students did not know was that Vanhoorne was much more lenient during deliberations, when the individual cases were being discussed. Students who have later come to work in his laboratory have often been taken aback by his easy-going nature. He went out of his way to look up suitable literature for them and stimulate their research. His broad background accrued in the course of his teaching career gave him interests outside his normal field of research. Under him the Palaeobotanical Unit in Antwerp developed into a multidisciplinary team covering such diverse subjects as palynology, leaf transport and degradation, diatom and rhizopod analysis, fossil bryophytes, stable and radiometric isotopes, to name but a few.

In some ways Professor Vanhoorne will have no regrets at retiring from his post. He takes a dim view of the in-fighting that occurs in university circles. There again administration and oral examinations took up valuable time, which he would have preferred to spend on research. Retirement will mean a release from outside pressures and time to complete some of the many files he has amassed over the years.

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