

Copy of a letter addressed to Dr. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, President of the History of Science Society, by Mr. George Sarton, Editor of Isis.

Harvard Library 185
Cambridge, Mass.

November 25, 1946

Dear Mr. President:

The situation of Isis has become so critical that it will be necessary for the council of our Society to discuss it at its annual meeting next month and to take measures for its improvement. If the Society is not able to find a remedy, it will be impossible for me to continue my work as editor.

In the spring of 1944, the printing of Isis was intrusted to the Harvard Printing Office, a department of Harvard University. I shall refer to it as the Harvard printers.

From the end of 1944 until now, the Harvard printers managed to issue 4 numbers of Isis, 101 to 104, totalling 325 p. In this year of 1946, there has appeared thus far but one number of four sheets (64 p.).

The Harvard printers know very well, of course, that a quarterly appearing only once or twice a year in small parts is doomed to extinction, and that the Society publishing it is bound to lose its membership. The Post Office has warned us repeatedly that our second-class mailing privileges might be revoked.

The journal intrusted to their care was not a new journal but an old one of established reputation. I founded it in 1912 and edited 36 volumes. It was from the beginning the leading journal of its kind in the whole world of letters; it was never a prosperous journal from the economic point of view and could not be, considering the relatively small number of scholars genuinely interested in the history of science. As long as I could, I paid out of my pocket the recurring deficits and thus spent the whole of my patrimony and a good part of my savings; I did that with great pleasure and would do it again, if it were possible. In spite of many imperfections, Isis remained until recently, a distinguished quarterly and the leading journal in its field.

The lack of cooperation of the Harvard printers or their lack of enterprise have reduced it to but a shadow of its former self. Isis is dying.

Any reasonable man will accept to wait at the end of a line, if he knows that the line is fair; but if the line is constantly replenished from the front, and he is kept always at the end, he feels cheated. The Harvard printers claim that they cannot work for Isis because of the Harvard University business which has a natural

priority; their work for Isis is not delayed and postponed indefinitely by the Harvard University business but by the Harvard Press business which is a different matter. Isis is kept steadily in the back to be dealt with, apparently, when there is nothing else to be done.

The purpose of my letter is not so much to recriminate against the Harvard printers which would be useless, but rather to justify my withdrawal, if the situation could not be remedied within a few months. The Harvard printers have all but destroyed Isis, and it would be easy enough for them to worry me to death. I would prefer to live a few more years, however, if only in order to be able to complete the volume III of my Introduction, and at least to begin (if not to complete) the eight volumes of my Harvard lectures on the history of science, a publication which is necessary, because there are no textbooks covering my courses.

It is a sad irony of fate that an outstanding journal survived many vicissitudes including two German invasions (Isis was formerly printed in Belgium) only to be destroyed by the Harvard printers.

In concluding, I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Pogo for his devoted cooperation and my apologies to the authors whose manuscripts fill many drawers in my office, to the reviewers, to the many collaborators in America and abroad whom I seem to have betrayed. Indeed, the feeling that I was wronging them has always been my deepest source of pain; I cannot endure it much longer.

I take the liberty of mailing copies of this letter to the officers of the History of Science Society, to the members of the editorial board of Isis, to the authors of unpublished MSS, to the main collaborators of Isis in the United States and abroad, to the Directors of the Harvard Press and of the Harvard Printing Office, to the Syndics of the Harvard Press and to a few friends.

Yours sincerely,

GS/FS

(Signed) George Sarton

P. S. Nos. 105 and 106, completing volume 36 of Isis, have finally appeared on December 5.

Bulletins prepared to simplify my correspondence
Bulletin no. 4, November 18, 1946

1. Introduction to the history of science - Volume III dealing with science and learning in the fourteenth century is being proofread. Printing is exceedingly slow. Most of the galleys have been read, as well as 637 page proofs, less than one-third.

A photographic reprint of vol. 1 (1927), long out of print, has been published by Williams and Wilkins, Baltimore. This was done without my knowledge and hence the book contains neither errata nor new preface. A few corrections will be indicated in the preface to vol. III.

2. Harvard lectures - The third part of the course on the history of science, dealing with the XVth, XVIth and XVIIth centuries, is now being explained to about 212 students. These lectures are given in the Geographical Building, Divinity Avenue, on Tu., Th., Sat. at 10 A.M.
3. Isis - Latest no., 104 January 1946 (vol. 36, 2). The printing of vol. 32 (stopped by the German invasion of Belgium) has been begun by the St. Catherine Press in Bruges.
4. Osiris - It is hoped that vol. 8 will appear in 1947. It will be dedicated to Paul Ver Eecke, Belgian historian of Greek mathematics.
5. Latest publication - no. 357. Demetrio Canevari, New York. Still available upon request.
6. London lectures - I had tentatively accepted to deliver a few lectures at the University of London in the spring of 1947. The possibility of my being able to do so is weakening every day, for I cannot leave Cambridge before having signed the final proofs of Vol. III.

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Cambridge, Mass., U. S. A.

George Sarton

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