

BOOK REVIEW

Russell W. Porter, Arctic Explorer, Artist, Telescope Maker

Berton C. Willard, Wheelright Company, Freeport, ME, 1976, Illustrated, 274 pp., \$12.50.

The multi-discipline hero is held dear by Western Culture. We revere the Da Vincis who are equally at home in art, science, and politics. We cherish Jefferson's taking his oath of office with his pockets bulging with fossils. Franklin dazzles us with his politics, writing, and science. We recall that he was granted every scientific medal his age had to offer, and that his textbook in electricity was the standard text for better than half a century. In the Age of Reason, all this was possible.

Our own century provides small opportunity for such genius to flower. With the admitted exception of Lindberg -- aviator, creator of the heart pump valve, pioneer patron of the space program via Goddard, and founder of airplane archeology -- we accept distressingly few such individuals today. Who recognizes the multi-genius of Robert Dietz, for example?

Consequently it is a real pleasure to have Berton Willard calling our attention to a kindred talent from our own century. Russell W. Porter had all the traditional folk-lore qualities that we so applaud. Porter was a polar explorer of sound position. His sketches and water colors of Eskimo life are both artistic and valuable to the historian. Astronomers concerned with his optical and telescopic contributions often have never heard of this walker of ice floes, and anthropologists are hardly aware of his influence on amateur telescope making. Even in optics, his fame looms in two sharply separated peaks. He started the amateur telescope movement. Without him, there would be no Sky and Telescope today. He also helped to make the 200-inch telescope mounting a major breakthrough in mechanics. And what Willard has neatly done is to round out the image of the man with each facet of his genius cleanly delineated. It is fitting and proper that the record of such a man be brought to a larger audience.

Willard does this. Even though the author was reared in a matrix of amateur telescope making, he resists the impulse to ride any personal hobby horse, and he gives a marvelously balanced account as undistorted as any biographer could.

And the writing is marked by clarity, movement, and drive. You can open the book at random and begin to read. In a few paragraphs you are "caught", interested, and can run on for pages. Even in areas of mostly pure data, where experienced biographers often bog down into artistic swamps, Willard keeps interesting. He never makes the mistake of writing for a special audience. Adults will find his ideas provocative, but teen-agers can find their special symbols too. He defines almost all his astronomical terms, and he does this with grace and clarity that make them memorable.

Another merit of the book is the one hundred, more or less, illustrations. The famous cutaway drawings of the 200-inch share space with sensitive water colors of Eskimos, a polar bear attack vies with a drawing of an ideal observatory. The illustrations run throughout the book and are not crowded into the cheaper ghetto of a central section. Both the author and publisher merit our thanks for such an abundance of graphics.

Just as excellent is the solid New Hampshire honesty that runs like a steel cord through all the text. Despite obvious indications of prodigious research (as attested to by the chapter notes and the bibliography), Willard assumes no role as a personal judge. He lets the record stand for the reader. For example, he gives full exposition to the role that Hartness played in the ATM movement before Porter arrived in Springfield. Willard elaborately

documents the importance of Ingalls and the Scientific American in creating the amateur movement. And on the topic in which affection is most likely to override fact -- the sources of the 200-inch mount -- Willard makes special care to mention the ideas of Pease. The final judgement is that it is impossible to ascertain just where all of the design ideas came from. All of this honesty inspires confidence in the rest of the text.

The book, however is something more than a gripping account of the surface, physical, operations of a great man. Willard starts with the young Porter and quickly weaves in a theme of young talent searching for an identity. We see the gear clashing with the academic monolith, the paucity of the commercial world, and the spiritual flight to the arctic wastes. And in retrospect we see the agony of a multi-talent trying to adjust to a society dedicated to single-talent. Today's teen-ager laments, "I don't know who I am!" Porter lacked the phrase but his problem lies clear on Willard's pages. The fact that his talent flourished in diverse soils merely brought more perplexity. This is the ultimate confusion of our age and Willard never indicates that Porter really adjusted to it. Perhaps real talent must always do without simple answers.

In his preface the author says he wrote the book to promote the idea that one should lead an adventurous and creative life. This attitude is solidly within our Western folk-lore tradition of idealism (Romanticism if you will). It is what an author is expected to say. But we wonder if our biographer is nevertheless lamenting the bitter truth that really we do not want multi-talents today, no matter what lip service we may pay them. Such individuals get more than their share of handicaps, and social acceptance comes all too slowly, if at all.

At any rate this beautifully written and scholarly documented biography reads like a novel. It belongs in every library, including the high school library and it should be read by everyone who is concerned about our reaction to our talented men. It will prove at least a solace to some, and perhaps supply strength to those who can read with sympathy.

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