

*To the Editors of 'The Observatory'*

*Kapteyn in Leiden*

In his review<sup>1</sup> of the second volume of van der Kruit's biography of Kapteyn<sup>2</sup>, Argyle wrote that Kapteyn "was to remain on the staff of Groningen for the remainder of his life". Kapteyn retired in 1921 at the age of 70, and the next director of the Astronomical Laboratory (later the Kapteyn Laboratory and now the Kapteyn Institute) in Groningen was his former student Pieter van Rhijn. Presumably, as a former full professor and director, Kapteyn became an emeritus upon retirement. After his thesis in Leiden and a further three years there, Kapteyn had become professor of astronomy and theoretical mechanics in Groningen in 1877 and spent the rest of his life there. Even though Kapteyn died already in 1922\*, there is an interesting detail missing.

Argyle mentioned a symposium in Groningen on Kapteyn<sup>3</sup>, which I attended (I was working at the Kapteyn Astronomical Institute at the time). I remember Willem de Sitter's grandson Wolter Reinold de Sitter (a professor of civil engineering) mentioning at that symposium that towards the end of his life Kapteyn had worked in Leiden. Checking the proceedings reminded me of the details: in 1918, the director of Leiden Observatory, E. F. van de Sande Bakhuijzen, died unexpectedly. Willem de Sitter (who had been Kapteyn's first doctoral student and after a few years in Groningen (including a couple of years working in Cape Town) spent most of his academic career in Leiden) then became temporary director (and later director until his death in 1934). Since de Sitter was in ill health, a major topic was the search for a successor. (He didn't die until much later, when he was succeeded by Hertzsprung, and remained productive as a scientist, even though his health had worsened after a 1919 operation for gall-bladder stones and as a result of tuberculosis.) Both Kapteyn and de Sitter recognized the importance of reorganizing the Observatory and increasing the director's salary (which Kapteyn thought to be so low that no-one from outside the Netherlands could be recruited). The younger de Sitter's contribution<sup>4</sup> is concerned mostly with this reorganization and the politics of filling the positions, all very interesting, and that story ends with one vacant position since Anton Pannekoek had been passed over because of his left-wing political views. [See thesis abstract on p. nn — Ed.] As a result, the elder de Sitter persuaded Kapteyn to accept a position as assistant director on a one-day-per-week (formally 1/6) basis. Kapteyn accepted, saying in a letter from 1920 June 13 that "[w]ith a [yearly] salary of three thousand guilders, I will be completely satisfied." So would I: 3000 guilders in the first two decades of the 20th Century had a purchasing power of about €40000 today<sup>5</sup>, not bad for one day per week. In 1900, Kapteyn received 6000 guilders as his annual salary as professor. By 1910, his annual income was 8500 guilders; because he had reached the maximum professorial salary, the difference must have been due largely to payment for his summer work at Mount Wilson<sup>6</sup>. In the same letter, Kapteyn demonstrated prescience by noting that Oort, if he first takes his doctoral degree in Groningen (which he would do in 1926), if his thesis "attracts the attention of astronomers, and if he then works for some time in Leiden as assistant and there too continues to develop outstanding qualities, then he could be your man." Oort became lecturer in Leiden in 1930 and professor in 1935 (upon the death of de Sitter) and director from 1945 until 1970. (Oort died in 1992. ADS lists 229 publications, 83 of which are after 1970.)

I enjoyed the symposium in Groningen on Kapteyn, which featured speakers

such as Adriaan Blaauw, Michael Feast, Robert W. Smith, Owen Gingerich, Gerard Gilmore, Michael Perryman, Piet van der Kruit, Maarten Schmidt, and Lodewijk Woltjer. It was jointly organized by van der Kruit and Klaas van Berkel, the latter from department of history at the University of Groningen. When, as often at conferences, there was discussion about the deadline for proceedings contributions, there was a bit of a clash of cultures when the historians arrived with their contributions already in final form and literally read their papers at the symposium.

Yours faithfully,  
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### *References*

- (1) R. W. Argyle, *The Observatory*, **141**, 207, 2021.
- (2) P. C. van der Kruit, *Jan Hendrik Oort: Master of the Galactic System* (Springer), 2020.
- (3) P. C. van der Kruit & K. Berkel (eds.), *The Legacy of J. C. Kapteyn* (Kluwer), 2000.
- (4) W. R. de Sitter, in (3), p. 79.
- (5) <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/research/projects/hpw/calculate.php>
- (6) W. E. Krul, in (3), p. 53.

\*Kapteyn died in Amsterdam in the home of the astronomer Ejnar Hertzsprung, who was also his son-in-law, being married to Kapteyn's daughter Henrietta; Kapteyn's granddaughter by them was named Rigel.