London's Leonardo: the life and work of Robert Hooke


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Abstract

Book synopsis: Interest in Robert Hooke (1635-1703) is growing and his reputation is rising. A widespread sympathy for a neglected figure of seventeenth-century science is being displaced by something more positive - a mixture of astonishment at the extraordinary range and diversity of his talents, esteem for the originality and acumen of his science, admiration for his administrative capability and civic integrity, and fascination at the energy, emotion, and frailty evident in a life fully engaged with the world of Restoration London. Comparisons with his enemy Newton are giving way to an appreciation of Hooke on his own terms, passionately occupied with experiment, invention, argument, writing, teaching, and earning a living as a scientist in a competitive world. The diversity of Hooke's activities has presented a serious obstacle to previous attempts to deal with his life and work. As Curator of Experiments to the Royal Society, Gresham Professor of Geometry, Surveyor to the City of London, author and inventor, Hooke challenges the boundaries of modern expertise. This book takes a different approach, by juxtaposing four accounts of the man from different but intersecting viewpoints. Unlike the aloof and distant demeanor adopted by Newton, concealing his views and speaking through surrogates, Hooke was a public man, bustling though the London streets, talking and arguing in coffee houses, lecturing to whatever audience might attend at Gresham College, performing (the theatrical connotation is appropriate) experiments at the assembly of the Royal Society, being lampooned in a London playhouse. Each of the authors has a record of specialist research on aspects of Hooke and they have come together to provide a significant revaluation of the most important facets of his life and work: his career as a public man, his instrument designing and making, his scientific thought, and the private world of his personal life, his illnesses and his medications. The year 2003 is the tercentenary of Hooke's death.

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