

Intellectual Adventure:

SCIENTIFIC, RELIGIOUS, AND THE FARTHER REACHES OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S IMAGINATION

by Peter Skinner

In **Decoding the Heavens: A 2,000-Year-Old-Computer—And the Century-Long Search To Discover Its Secrets** (Da Capo, 978-0-306-81742-7) Jo Marchant, editor of the UK's *New Scientist* magazine, gives us a revealing all-angles account of the still incomplete explication of the Antikythera "mechanism" or "computer." In 1901, sponge fishers brought up four encrusted, corroded bronze fragments from a shipwreck off the coast of Antikythera Island. How the four pieces might fit together, what the mechanism was for, how it might have worked, and its probable date posed huge challenges; x-ray technology was initially inadequate and provenance and date were difficult to fix definitively. Even after the mechanism's purpose—to calculate planetary cycles—was established, the interactions of the mechanism's gears, dials, and pointers posed endless problems.

With the brilliant scientist Derek de Solla Price's entry into the field in 1958, intensive research took off, but not without feuds and betrayals among participants. Only in the last decades, with the advent of revolutionary new technology, could the mechanism's complex internal gearing and incised operating instructions be mapped and its awesome sophistication and multiple predictive capacities be revealed and understood.

Jo Marchant tells an enthralling tale of research and reconstruction that positions the birth of applied scientific technology among the Greeks a full half-millennium earlier than previously thought. She ably captures the interplay of temperaments and approaches to problem-solving among remarkably gifted and driven researchers; she also presents tantalizing and long neglected references in Roman literature to the mechanism and to its partial resurrection in the early Muslim world. Archaeology, conceptual thinking, mathematics, and the successful reconstruction of the mechanism all are engrossingly presented.

In **A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State** (The Overlook Press, 978-1-59020-171-8), the historian Charles Freeman pitches us into a world in which a magnificent diversity of opinion and extensive intellectual networking were quashed in 381, when Emperor Theodosius superseded Constantine's Edict of Toleration. It stated, "...no one shall be denied freedom" to believe "as he deems best suited to himself." But after defeat at Adrianople in 378, when Emperor Valens died on the battlefield fighting the Goths, the Empire desperately needed a single supportive Church, not a divisive set of quarreling Christian communities—and Theodosius was determined to create it. He decreed, "...all peoples shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans..." And he required acceptance of the "single deity of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost," as promulgated in the Nicene Creed. "Demented and insane" non-acceptors would be "smitten by Divine Vengeance"—and imperial hostility.

American presidential debates pale beside the intensity of the early Church's theological set-to's in which victory brought power and political prestige. Typically, Theodosius' Council of Constantinople failed to promote doctrinal peace: "the bishops screeched on every side...a mob of wild young men... like a swarm of wasps." Freeman brilliantly recreates the late-Roman, early medieval world: Origen, Eusebius, Augustine, Ambrose, and other theologians are active players, not textbook figures, while tolerance has a moving voice in Themistius and Symmachus. All is set against an evocative presentation of power, politics, war, and Church-building in the late Roman world, often of surprising modernity.

The third book of this trio, **A Night in the Cemetery and other Stories of Crime and Suspense** (translated by Peter Sekirin, Pegasus Books, 978-1-933648-86-6), presents Chekhov's ventures into crime fiction. He began writing crime-and-punishment stories before qualifying as a physician, after which he often accompanied the police to crime scenes, never losing his fascination with the aberrations of human behavior. Though not then the assured master, Chekhov ranged far afield, capturing the simple greed that leads to murder for money, illuminating the psychology of cover-ups ("...fa-mi-ly ho-nor is a prejudice when false-ly under-stood!" [sic]), projecting the effects of fear ("...lay down on the sofa and died") or noting useful spousal caution ("Michael! Remember Siberia and the prisons!").

Chekhov offers more moralists than murderers and the ghostly is more present than the ghastly. We're never in downtown Chicago of the '30s; we are most often among small folk in small towns. Only their hopes, fears, and mistakes are big-time. An entertaining collection, though not without 'prentice sketches, but nonetheless of much interest in demonstrating the development of technique. Peter Sekirin provides a useful introduction; as a translator he is not always averse to breezy Americanisms.. **F**

Peter Skinner was born and educated in England, and came to New York with a degree in European history from Oxford University. In America, he has taught and worked in PR and corporate communications, and has always been involved in editing, reviewing, writing, and text-doctoring. Peter is the author of World Trade Center, a book on 9/11 that sold over a million copies in twelve languages.