Jean Lefevre

Jean Lefevre was born in Lisieux, France, in 1652. There is no definite information on his educational background, but it seems probable that he had no university-level education. In fact, the first thirty years of his life are fairly murky in terms of their historical documentation; little is known about his early life except he most likely had working-class origins and his initial occupation was that of a weaver.

Lefevre’s primary field of science was astronomy. He began his career as an assistant to Jean Picard at the College de Lisieux, collaborating in the calculations for Picard’s *Connaissances des temps*. Lefevre’s work impressed his colleagues to such an extent that they nominated him for membership in the acclaimed Academie des Sciences.

After Picard’s death in 1682, Lefevre went on to complete and publish the *Connaissances des temps* himself. He also began to dabble professionally in the field of cartography, assisting de La Hire with his surveying work in France.

There was one significant drama in Lefevre’s professional life, a dispute with de La Hire over intellectual property: the ownership of the astronomical tables calculated in conjunction with Picard’s project. La Hire published the tables as his own, and Lefevre claimed that he should have gotten credit for them. When La Hire’s son (also an astronomer) went on to publish another set of astronomical tables in 1701, Lefevre furiously denounced the de La Hires and published his writings as a preface to *Connaissances des temps*. Shortly afterward, this vindictive preface was censored and replaced on government authority, and Lefevre was ousted from the Academie in 1701. The official reason for his exclusion was “irregular attendance.”

Although Lefevre’s career supposedly ends at that juncture, there has been speculation to the effect that he continued working under another name (supposedly "J de Beaulieu"), publishing further writings in the first decade of the 18th century. Unfortunately, on this point, as with so much of Lefevre’s life, there is very little concrete evidence one way or another. There is merely the resemblance of Beaulieu’s style to Lefevre’s and the time span in which de Beaulieu’s work appeared, ending in 1706 (which was the year Lefevre died).

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Sources:
2. JJ O'Connor and E.F. Robertson, School of Mathematics and Statistics, University of St. Andrews in Scotland, “Jean Le Frevre,” article available from MacTutor at http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/Mathematicians/Le_Fevre.html