
Science & Technology

**THE CRIME OF
CLAUDIUS PTOLEMY**

by Robert R. Newton
Johns Hopkins, 1977
411 pp. \$22.50
L of C 77-4211
ISBN 0-8018-1990-3

Claudius Ptolemy, who flourished around A.D. 130, formulated the geocentric theory of the universe, which held that the planets and stars revolve around a stationary earth. He was long considered the greatest astronomer in antiquity on the basis of the discoveries he described in his *Syntaxis*. To Johns Hopkins physicist Newton, the Alexandrian sage is "the most successful fraud in the history of science." The astronomer's reputation had already come under attack as a result of allegations by Nicolaus Copernicus in his widely publicized *De revolutionibus* (1543). Now Newton's meticulously documented study reveals that Ptolemy faked astronomical data, worked backwards from results he was trying to prove, and claimed to have made observations that could not have been made from Alexandria. His models of the moon and Mercury "conflict violently with elementary observation." Newton's conclusion: Astronomy would be better off if Ptolemy's *Syntaxis* had never been written.

**LETTERS FROM THE
FIELD 1925-1975**

by Margaret Mead
Harper, 1978, 345 pp. \$12.95
L of C 73-4110
ISBN 0-06-012961-1

Margaret Mead's experiences during anthropological field trips to Samoa, the Admiralty Islands, New Guinea, Bali, and elsewhere are the subject of 50 years of letters to friends and family who must have counted themselves lucky to be among her correspondents. "We have to wait for the water to rise for this village to do any ceremonies. At present it simply eats, drinks, sleeps, and has séances about crocodiles," she wrote in 1938 from Tamburam, upriver on the Sepik from Madang, New Guinea. The meticulous scientist emerges, one who typed her field notes on the most durable rag-content paper and felt relief when her research reached the point at which the data would be sufficient even if her work were interrupted. A thinker never trapped by the arcana of her anthropology, she vigorously describes individuals in hunting-and-gathering societies moving to a technological economy.