

# Editorial

This issue is the first in Y2K-1. Y2K has been pronounced World Mathematical Year by the International Mathematical Union, in addition to it being an ICME year (the ninth), which will be held near Tokyo from July 31st to August 6th, 2000. The summer of Y2K will also see the 20th anniversary of David Wheeler's creation of *For the Learning of Mathematics*, which started in July 1980.

Anniversaries are often a time for looking back as much as forward. Yet such is the future orientation of much of present culture that being backward looking is frequently deemed tantamount to being backward. It was not always so. Legends of the fall invoke the progressive loss of knowledge, where 'the ancients' knew much more than we. When was that threshold passed where what was to be known in the future was seen to be greater rather than less than what was known in the present or the past?

Yet there is always loss. As any enterprise gets older, its participants do also, and some begin to die. Over the past two years, we have witnessed the deaths of Bob Davis, Efraim Fischbein, Claude Janvier, Leen Streefland and Alba Thompson, among others. Before them went Hans Freudenthal, Caleb Gattegno, Nicolas Herscovics, Hilary Shuard, Richard Skemp, ... The list goes on, increasing annually, a sad concomitant marker of the greater establishment of our once-new field.

40 years ago this year the Royaumont meeting in Asnières-sur-Oise, France took place that set into play the modernist version of mathematics education. In that same year, and under the same auspices, namely the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, was sponsored a survey of practices and trends in school mathematics (a forerunner of SIMS and TIMSS in some sense) in twenty-one countries. Accounts of both are published in *New Thinking in School Mathematics* (OECD, 1961). Those who are currently pre-occupied with school mathematics reform and reformism might do well to revisit this document, and feel its soon-to-be shaping hand on the now-recent past.

Franklin: You could say that we are trying to shed the burden of the past.

Headmaster: Shed it? Why must we shed it? Why not shoulder it? Memories are not shackles, Franklin, they are garlands.

Franklin: We are too tied to the past. We want to be free to look to the future. The future comes before the past.

Headmaster: Nonsense. The future comes after the past. Otherwise it couldn't be the future. [1]

At different times, as editor, David Wheeler tried to encourage the working-on of corresponding future-oriented Hilbert problems for mathematics education (the mathematical originals now being almost one hundred years old). In January 1983, he wrote to sixty mathematics educators soliciting

'research problems whose solution would make a substantial contribution to mathematics education'. In issues 4(1), 4(2) and 4(3) of this journal, excerpts were published from twenty-one respondents, which are interesting to read even a mere fifteen years later. One of the quickest things to evaporate from some of the original Hilbert 23 was the sense of why they were seen as pressing or significant. Wheeler tried something similar for the 50th issue of FLM. He received a less forthcoming response to his challenging question 'Does mathematics education really exist?' the second time around.

Rather than invite responses to a single question, for the issues of FLM appearing in the year 2000, I would like particularly to encourage submission of articles taking both a backward- and forward-looking perspective on an area, a sort of taking stock with prognostication, without necessarily falling into a Whig stance of how we have reached this best of all possible mathematics education worlds. [2] A plausible sense of progress in an emerging discipline is perhaps one of the hardest things to develop. (William Thurston's piece, reprinted in 15(1), has the word 'progress' in its title: what might be in a comparable piece entitled 'On proof and progress in mathematics education'?)

This issue sees some writing concerned with trying to get a line on such developments. Bill Barton's essay review attempts to delineate some of the directions he sees ethnomathematics developing while identifying sources of these strands. He also points to the growing ubiquity of English as the medium of international academic communication as we enter the next millennium, with curiosity and concern. Patricio Herbst and Jeremy Kilpatrick offer some orientation for anglophones attempting to engage with Brousseau's seminal writings on *didactique des mathématiques*, another development from France. And William Higginson offers his views on three attempts to incorporate post-modern perspectives into mathematics education. None of this writing is encyclopaedic in the Bourbaki sense, nor is that the genre hoped for. But between them they do offer perspectives informed by memory as well as hope.

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The appearance of the journal within the calendar year is to be regularised, commencing with this issue. *For the Learning of Mathematics* will now be published at four-monthly intervals, namely in March, July and November of each year.

## Notes

[1] From *Forty Years On* by Alan Bennett (Faber and Faber, 1969) p. 52.

[2] For a strong airing of this idea in relation to the history of mathematics, see Unguru, S. (1975) 'On the need to rewrite the history of Greek mathematics', *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 15(1), 67-114, and the subsequent responses by van der Waerden, Freudenthal and Weil published in the same journal over the ensuing couple of years.