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Cultivating the herb garden of Scandinavian mathematics: the congresses of Scandinavian mathematicians, 1909–1925. (English summary)

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Established by Swedish mathematician and avid institution-builder Gösta Mittag-Leffler (1846–1927) in 1909 amidst a climate of growing scientific internationalism soon to be tested by war, the first six Scandinavian Congresses of Mathematics offer Turner and Sørensen fertile ground for explaining and contextualizing the emergence of what they call a “conational” professional community of Scandinavian mathematicians in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The authors draw effectively on Mittag-Leffler’s correspondence (held at the Institut Mittag-Leffler in Stockholm), joined with the conference proceedings and a well-chosen complement of further contemporary sources and secondary analyses, to examine the roles of language, culture, infrastructure, and personal and professional identity in the constitution of a network of mathematicians intermediate and adjacent to both the predominant national and international organs of mathematical scholarship of the period. Their term “conational” helpfully emphasizes that the Scandinavian mathematicians’ regional coordination offered a complementary infrastructure that remained primarily rooted in national-scale organization but which built on perceived affinities and historical, institutional, and linguistic ties amongst the mathematicians of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland.

After a survey of the relevant literature on turn-of-the-century internationalism in science and mathematics and a brief overview of the organization, demographics, and languages of the six congresses that took place during Mittag-Leffler’s lifetime, Turner and Sørensen single out four concerns for more detailed discussion. First, they situate Mittag-Leffler’s early efforts to establish the congresses amidst the 1905 political disunion of Norway and Sweden and the prevailing contexts of regional scientific and mathematical coordination, suggesting that the congresses offered Scandinavian mathematicians a vehicle for regional solidarity and self-assertion. In the next two sections they examine the congresses’ organizational features and account for their continuation after the outbreak of the First World War and their adaptation thereafter to the linguistic and political challenges of fully incorporating Finnish mathematicians. Their view of the Great War shows, in particular, how even mathematical institutions outside of the principal belligerent countries changed as a result of the conflict. Lastly, they examine the interaction of the new conational community with Mittag-Leffler’s (and a few others’) ambitions both to consolidate local legitimacy and to assert a common presence and relevance on a broader international stage.

Turner and Sørensen’s sensitivity to the interaction between institutional configurations and political goals makes this article a worthy corrective to accounts that focus only on a single scale of organization or that assume that mathematicians cooperate easily across linguistic and geopolitical divides. If anything, the authors sell short their intervention’s importance when suggesting that it was the “universal and abstract character” of mathematics, rather than its embeddedness in local culture and applications, that underwrote its transnational figuration (p. 394). Rather, the authors invite historians of twentieth-century European mathematics and of international science to

recognize the local and inward-facing underpinnings of so much of the international expansion that would come to characterize science in the last century. *Michael J. Barany*

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