

SCIENCE

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PLANS FOR A HISTORY OF MATHEMATICS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

My distinguished predecessor in the presidency of this association at one time ingeniously concocted a plan of procedure which if adopted, would have enabled him and succeeding presidents to escape the ordeal of preparing a presidential address. As a member of the council, I greatly enjoyed cooperating with others in nipping the president's scheme in the bud. Little did I know at that time that I was working against my own best interests and against the pleasure and comfort of the association on the present occasion.

An address being expected, it is my intention briefly to discuss plans of an organized movement for the writing of the history of mathematics of the nineteenth century on a scale commensurate with what has been achieved for previous periods. Taking for granted that such a history is desirable, in order that the present age may apprehend itself by comprehending its origin and growth, three important questions present themselves for consideration: Is it possible so early in the present century to write a satisfactory history of the preceding century? What will be the magnitude of the task, as compared with the labor involved in writing the earlier history? What should be the aim and nature of such a history?

As regards the first question, the material for the writing of modern scientific history is quite easily accessible. In this respect the writer of the history of science enjoys a great advantage over the writer of the history of recent diplomacy or war. Nor are the feelings and prejudices as intense on matters of

¹ Address delivered by Professor Florian Cajori as retiring president of the Mathematical Association of America, at Dartmouth College, on Saturday, September 7, 1918.