

In Memory of John Fauvel

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It is not frequently the case --- but you will definitely have to count it a blessing if that ever happens --- when you first get acquainted with somebody you immediately feel really at ease with the person and can carry on a conversation which goes far beyond polite exchange of amenities and pleasantries. I had that kind of experience when I first met John Fauvel in the summer of 1988. With his untimely passing in the evening of 12 May 2001 this blessing came to a sudden end.

In August of 1988 a workshop was initiated and organized by Otto Bekken at Kristiansand in Norway to "present, discuss and develop concrete ideas from the history of mathematics which can be used to motivate, to illustrate and to enhance the understanding of some key concepts and methods from the mathematics curriculum". The heterogeneous group of 24 invited participants from different parts of the world with different cultural or academic background --- mathematicians, mathematics educators, historians of mathematics --- turned out to work surprisingly well, each complementing the others and all forming a most congenial and dedicated group. They learned from each other, argued with each other, discussed among each other, but all the time in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, which was helped by the scenic and serene environment of Gimlekollen Mediasenter, a boarding school by the side of woods and lake. Besides the regular programme of lectures/discussion every morning and afternoon, exchange of ideas went on during coffee breaks, at lunch/dinner

tables, well into the night (if one can call it the night when it is still so bright at 22:00 hour up there in Scandinavia!), and even on the meandering trail through the woods to a refreshing dip in the cool lake in the early morning. I was at the time a newcomer to this group, many of whom were already by then very active in the HPM (International Study Group on the Relations Between the History and Pedagogy of Mathematics). Almost immediately I felt that I was being received warmly into the family. It confirms my belief that a regard for history of mathematics can generate in a person a warm, gentle and humane attitude that will show up not just in the intellectual commitment in the discipline but also in other aspects of life. Among this group of good friends whom I made in the summer of 1988, John stood out as a tall, lean and young chap. For the ensuing twelve years we met quite frequently in conferences. He came to Hong Kong twice in this period, once in 1995 in connection with the making of a film series for the Open University and once in 1998 on his way out to New Zealand as the New Zealand Mathematical Society's Visiting Lecturer. In between such pleasant rendezvous we kept up our correspondence. John had always been so kind and supportive to me, and indeed he contributed much to my professional growth, through his books and papers, through his judicious advice and sometimes just some encouraging words at the right moment. In the summer of 1996 we expected to meet again in Sevilla in Spain and in Braga in Portugal, but the deteriorating health of my father resulted in my last minute cancellation of the trip. John, as thoughtful as usual, sent me a postcard from Sevilla with the signatures of many friends who were attending the conference and conveyed greetings from afar. That is typical of John, always having his friends in mind. A week later I received another postcard from John in Braga telling me how well Chun-Ip Fung, a former student of mine, stood in for me in the talk I was supposed to give. Again, that is typical of John, always ready to give credit and encouragement to newcomers. Last summer we expected to see each other again at Makuhari in Japan and later in Taipei in China. A few days before leaving for

Japan I received an email from John saying that he had to miss the conference in Japan because he would be going into the hospital to have an operation on the bile duct. Thinking back, I am once more struck by his thoughtfulness towards friends. I was too careless at the time not to be aware of the seriousness of his illness, which he tried to hide from his friends in order not to cause them anxiety. If this was his intention, he did it well when he appeared in Taipei so cheerfully at the HPM Conference. Participants will certainly remember the jocular performance our good friend John put up at the Kara-oke! Looking back with sadness, I am at least glad that John left me with this last impression of him, a good friend in high spirits. I will treasure it.

John, who had taught at the Open University in UK since 1974, was a renowned historian of mathematics, particularly in British mathematical development from the sixteenth century onward. He was the President of the British Society for the History of Mathematics from 1991 to 1994 and had edited its Newsletter since 1995. Besides working as a historian of mathematics, John was also a strong and effective proponent of the relation between history of mathematics and mathematics education. As the Chair of HPM from 1992 to 1996 he promoted activities in the form of international conferences and in co-chairing (with Jan van Maanen) the 10th ICMI Study on the Role of the History of Mathematics in the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics. Were it not for the encouragement coming from John and Jan I might not have the great fortune to work closely with them in that project. Participants at that ICMI Study Conference held in Luminy in April 1998 will no doubt cherish the memorable evening of the conference dinner in which the "three John's" (John Fauvel and Jan van Maanen, the co-chairs, and Jean-Luc Dorier, the local organizer) were heartily congratulated and acclaimed for their admirable dedication and professionalism bestowed on the project. This is just one example of a wonderful collaboration in which John took part. All those who

have the good fortune to be acquainted with John and who have worked with him together will, like me, miss him very very much. It is indeed a sad loss for all of us, but we also know that John's memory and contribution will continue to be felt through the many books and papers he had published, and his influence will be carried on through those who have known this wonderful man.