

Changing Channels: Constructing and comparing national identities in French and British mathematics, c. 1800-1840 / Des effets de Manche: sur la construction et la comparaison d'identités nationales dans les mathématiques françaises et britanniques, 1800-1840

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Reconsidering the “decline of 18C British mathematics”

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The historiographical notion of a “supposed decline of ‘British mathematics’ after the death of Isaac Newton” has been “thoroughly nuanced, if not outright debunked”, as Brigitte Stenhouse and Nicolas Michel write in the seminar prospectus. At present, we can read several historical accounts of the development of 18th-century calculus and algebra, and even accounts in which not only “pure” mathematics is considered, but in which “importance is given to other disciplines such as geometry, mechanics, or applied mathematics” (seminar prospectus). Indeed, we can refer to several histories of 18th-century calculus, algebra, the analytical mechanics of extended bodies, and celestial mechanics. However, notwithstanding the “debunking” of the “decline thesis”, when we read the above accounts, even the recent fine chapters by June Barrow-Green, Jeremy Gray and Robin Wilson, and by Jeanne Peiffer (see the References), we are struck by the fact that very few British mathematicians active in the second half of the 18th century are mentioned, and those few only in passing. Note: this is not a criticism of the above chapters!!! Quite the contrary. I am referring to these chapters as examples of the best we can hope to read in this field. I simply love them, and I think there is much to be learned from studying them, as I will try to do in my talk. This talk is proposed as an attempt to discuss the “decline of 18th century British mathematics thesis” in the light of the best recent historiography of 18th-century mathematics (viz. the above chapters). I will also draw freely on two of my own papers (see the References) in order to reconsider them with a critical eye.

References

June Barrow-Green, Jeremy Gray, Robin Wilson, Chapters 7, “The 18th century”, Chapter 8 “18th Century number theory and geometry,” Chapter 9 “Euler, Lagrange and 18th Century Calculus,” Chapter 10 “18th Century Applied Mathematics,” Chapter 11 “18th Century Celestial Mechanics,” in *The History of Mathematics: A Source-Based Approach*, MAA Press, Volume 2, 2022, pp. 191-330.

Niccolò Guicciardini, “Dot-Age: Newton’s Mathematical Legacy in the Eighteenth Century,” *Early Science and Medicine* 9(3) 2004, pp. 218-56.

Niccolò Guicciardini, “The Quarrel on the Invention of the Calculus in Jean E. Montucla and Joseph Jérôme de Lalande, *Histoire des Mathématiques (1758/1799-1802)*,” in *The History of the History of Mathematics*, B. Wardhaugh (ed.), Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 73-88.

Jeanne Peiffer, “Inventing Mathematics,” in *Volume 4: A Cultural History of Mathematics in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Maarten Bullynck, Bloomsbury Press, 2024 [part of a 6 volumes set edited by David Rowe and Joseph Dauben].

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