

Viggo Brun (1835-1978)

Viggo Brun (1835-1978). In: Revue d'histoire des sciences. 1980, Volume 33 number 3. pp. 253-54.

Translation by Kellen Myers, Rutgers University.

Translator's note: The title, given here by Persée, is clearly a mistake – the article must be titled incorrectly in their database, since these are surely not the years of Viggo Brun's life. I suspect it is nothing more than a typo in data-entry. The correct years are indicated in the article to follow.

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OBITUARIES

Viggo Brun (1885-1978)

All those who have had the privilege of knowing the Norwegian historian of mathematics Viggo Brun, recently deceased, have kept the memory of an affable and distinguished man, of a dedicated Platonic humanist, of a mathematician with a knowing, original, precise intellect, and of a historian of mathematical interests, above in all the lives of the greatest intellects of his Norwegian nationality – Abel in particular –, in the study of the connections between mathematics and different categories of art – and especially in problems of geometry posed by certain works of art or by myriad natural structures.

Born the 19th of October 1885 in Lear, youngest in a family of ten children, Viggo Brun, who lost his parents too soon, was raised by his older sisters. Entering the University of Oslo in 1903, he undertook mathematical and scientific studies. In the course of a visit to Göttingen in 1910, he began his first personal research, directed towards different problems in number theory that he would approach with delicate methods, although appearing elementary, inspired by particular procedures and algorithms used in Antiquity, such as the sieve of Eratosthenes¹. After many years devoted to mathematical research, and then to military service, in 1921 he was named assistant of applied mathematics at the University of Oslo. In 1923, he taught as professor at the Technical University of Trondheim, then from 1946 to 1956, the year of his retirement, at the University of Oslo. Married in 1940 to Laura Michelsen, director of a sewing school, he spent with her many years at Drøback, near Oslo, in their beautiful home in the style of the 18th century, situated in a landscape of forests covering the fjord, where he passed away on the 15th of August 1978.

Sparked by a profound conviction towards pacifism, he participated actively in political life. But, attracted more and more to nature and history's legacy; he devoted himself and redoubled his efforts in studying defense of the natural environment and ancient habitat sites.

In addition to his mathematical works, isolated but very original, and to numerous articles concerning connections between mathematics and art² or the geometric study of certain natural structures (pollen, viruses, etc.), he wrote two works, in Norwegian, one on the ancient mathematics of the country, and the other a survey of mathematical history from Antiquity to the Renaissance,³ and numerous articles, notices, and monographs concerning the life and works of eminent Norwegian mathematicians and physicists : Caspar Wessel, Abel, Carl Störmer, Axle Thue, etc.⁴ Let us remember in particular that he published, in *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences* two critical analyses on the works of Abel (vol. VII, 1955, p. 360-361 and vol. X, 1959, p. 81-82) and two articles : "Discovery of a manuscript of Abel" (vol. VII, 1955, p.103-106) and "Caspar Wessel and the geometric introduction of complex numbers" (vol. XV, 1962, p. 19-24).

René TATON, *trans. Kellen Myers*

¹ See, on this subject, the notice of Christoph J. Scriba, Viggo Brun in memoriam (1885-1978) (*Historia Mathematica*, vol. 7, 1980, p. 1-6, with portrait on cover), which gives a partial bibliography of the works of Viggo Brun, among which the Centre Alexandre-Koyré possesses an important collection.

² See the aforementioned notice of Ch. J. Scriba.

³ *Regnekunsten i det gamle Norge*, Bergen-Oslo, 1962; *All er tall. Matematikkens historie fra Oldtid til Renaissance*, Bergen-Oslo, 1964.

⁴ See the aforementioned notice of Ch. J. Scriba.