

## Seminar SAW History of Science, History of Text, 2011-2016

May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016

### Printing scholarship

#### Presentation

In continuity with the previous session, the session will explore how we can approach the status of a field of inquiry through the way in which writings are printed, and the various media used for the circulation of knowledge.

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*Appropriating role models for the mathematical profession: Biographies in the American Mathematical Monthly around 1900*

**Abstract** – During the decades around 1900, American mathematics underwent monumental developments that took it from a provincial position at the fringes of the mathematical community into a position from which it could compare to other nations and at some point come to dominate global mathematics. At that time, institutions were devised and shaped to promote mathematical research and instruction, and an intriguing group of individuals were moulded into the first generation of really professional American mathematicians.

In this talk, I propose to analyse the writing of history of mathematics — in this particular case the biography of mathematicians — as situated in a particular discourse of professionalization in the local settings of American mathematics around 1900. In this respect, the analysis is based on an adaptation of the meta-biographical methodology employed by Nicolaas Rupke to bring forth the “many Humboldts” appropriated for different (German) socio-political contexts (Rupke, 2008). Rupke’s approach was, however, a longitudinal one devoted to appropriations of one individual at different times over a period of almost 200 years. Here, focus will be much narrower in geographical and temporal terms, yet the subjects of the biographies will be more varied.

The talk seeks to analyse the interplay between the appropriation of past mathematicians and the shaping of a new profession of mathematicians in a local context. It first provides a brief overview of the biographical genre in the nineteenth century as it pertains to mathematics in order to also briefly address the relations between studying biographies of mathematicians and history of mathematics. It then paints a sketch of American mathematics around 1900, by drawing on biographies from the American Mathematical Monthly. This leads into three topical case studies devoted to detailed analyses of biographies published in the American Mathematical Monthly between the inception of the journal in 1894 and 1904 when the editorial line changed to devote much less attention to biographies.