

On a visit to the grave site of Niels Henrik Abel (1802-1829) on August 10, 1988, an eulogy was delivered by Man-Keung Siu on behalf of the Kristiansand Conference participants, who although separated from Abel by both time and distance, still sense his mathematical greatness and lament his lost potential.

Two days ago Otto asked me to say a few words on this occasion of making our pilgrimage to Froland, where exactly 160 years ago Niels Henrik Abel spent the summer and where a year later he died and was buried at the age of 26, I was told that I was chosen to speak because I come from afar. Since I keep a travel log, I can even tell you the exact distance I have covered so far, starting from Hong Kong. It is 16,919 km. Mathematically speaking, the only connection I can make of this and Abel is that a group of order 16,919 ($= 7 \times 2417$) is abelian (actually cyclic), the proof of which will be left to the reader, But in this wonderful gathering at Kristiansand we share the conviction that mathematics is not just a collection of theorems and formulae; there is a cultural and human element to it. So, we come here today not just for a technical mathematical connection. For myself, and I believe it also true for others, I harbour a deep admiration and respect for Abel, not just for the contributions he made in mathematics, but also for his qualities as a human being, I am glad and I feel honored to be given this chance to speak.

I first read of the life of Abel in the popular account "Genius and Poverty" by E. T. Bell when I was a first year undergraduate. At that time, young and ignorant as I was, I was already moved and inspired by this story of a young man who gave so much of himself despite the adversity he had to face, so much so that he was robbed of his life in his prime, Schopenhauer maintained that a strong motive that led people to art and science was flight from the harshness of everyday life. I think there is another, perhaps even stronger, motive: namely, an inner call of intellectual curiosity and quest for learning.

If I may now be allowed to indulge in a more personal note, I would add that 25 years after I read this story, now that I am no longer young but only slightly less ignorant, this feeling and admiration can only be strengthened, especially after I learned of the painful sufferings most of my mathematician friends in China had gone through in those infamous years labelled "the Cultural Revolution." Of course, that dreadful experience is a nightmare behind them for over a decade by now, and hopefully history will not repeat itself at that, but they are still working under difficult conditions, this time in financial terms. Many things we take for granted are to them luxuries. In some sense their situation is not unlike what Abel had been facing, Like Abel, they continue to work hard despite that, and many literally give their lives for science in their motherland. I know of quite a number of Chinese mathematicians who have died in their forties, some of whom had made noted contributions in their own fields.

History will surely reward scholars with such devotion, just like Abel is remembered today. Even without such recognition and honor, they would, I believe, gladly do the same at their inner calls. But would it not be infinitely better if they can work and contribute in a more agreeable environment which they more than deserve when they were living? A regard for learning is what we need in the society of today. With this wish I shall end my humble speech.

[Learn From the Masters! Proceedings of Conference / Workshop on the History of Mathematics at Kristiansand, Norway, August 1988, (Eds.) F. Swetz, J. Fauvel, O. Bekken, B. Johansson, V. Katz, Math. Asso. America, 1995, 298-299.]